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BY NO FAULT OF THEIR OWN.

BY NO FAULT OF THEIR OWN.

A Novel.

BY

MISS TELFER.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

LONDON:
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BY NO FAULT OF THEIR OWN.

CHAPTER I.

UNDER CHESNEY OAK.

CHESNEY OAK was a fine specimen of those superlatively large trees which are dignified by a name—often by a history—of their own. This one, however, had no especial interest in the way of tradition attached to it, nor was it placed alone in imposing solitude, like most of its kind. On the contrary, it stood immediately before the entrance to a coppice, like a general heading his troops. And how beautiful that coppice was! With the eyes of my mind I can see before me now, as I write, how it looked in the summer weather, when the sun flickered in yellow light between the millions of fluttering green leaves that kept all beneath their soft shade as cool and sheltered as though in some large stone hall: in winter, when the new-fallen snow lay in dazzling, rimy whiteness on every little twig and heavy bough, giving the idea of gigantic lace-work standing on a back-ground of brightest, deepest azure: in spring, when a flush of the soft green of opening buds was spread over it, and little dark spots, here and there,

high among the branches showed where the birds had built their nest—where the little mothers were sitting sheltering their young ones while their mates made the air re-echo with their clear twitterings. But it looked more beautiful than ever in autumn, when the oak trees were laden with acorns, and each leaf flecked by crimson and yellow hues mingling with their green. When the fir-cones had begun to fall, and many of the spiky leaves were littering the ground, while a fragrance, sweet and fresh as suave, came from the tall, red, slender trunks that looked so bare against the dark, blue-green tufts of their dense summits and threw their shadows on the rich luxuriance of the undergrowth beneath. There were the trailing briars of the blackberry with its purple fruit and pale rose-tinted blossoms—the russet-brown rustling ferns—the fragile sprays of blue harebells here and there—the luscious, damp, dark moss and close-leaved ground-ivy carpeting the reddish soil, where it showed itself in an irregular narrow footpath between the borders of rich green grass on either side. Where the rabbits scampered, and the little red squirrels looked for nuts and climbed up and down the tree-trunks; where owls had been heard to hoot at night in place of the nightingales who sing there in the warm summer evenings with no hearers but the quiet stars, or a stray pair of village lovers strolling home through the park to Radford; for, as has been said, there was a right of way through the Draycott estate—or rather what remained of it—and it led through this coppice, and necessarily therefore past Chesney Oak.

A little patch of ground was bare immediately in front of the big oak, and part of the trunk of an old tree that had been blown down one stormy night, was placed against the side of it, forming a pretty comfortable seat, and one, too, of which Joan (who had a happy knack of finding out pleasant places) was very fond. It was her favourite spot about Radford, and while she could sit down and rest at her leisure, there was a very fair view of the rush-edged river flowing smoothly on through the low, level meadows not a hundred yards distant. Over these meadows, the country being rather flat and open in those parts, she could see for miles away, until her view was bounded by the blueish-green hills belonging to an adjoining county. The coppice was very quiet and solitary, for it turned its back to the Hall and village, and very rarely anyone except herself and the old shepherd (who belonged to the Draycott's farm and lived in that direction) ever passed that way, unless during the long summer evenings and on Sundays. It was the afternoon of the day when Mr. Aynard's letter had been received. Joan had left the cottage with her nerves somewhat on the jar, and her feelings all the more excited because she had not ventured to show their very mingled character to her aunt, and set off by herself on a stroll to Chesney Oak with a book under her arm. She was at once triumphant and a little frightened—very nearly decided, and most restlessly apprehensive that she was deciding in a wrong manner: confident, too, that she must prepare for the consequences of the great anger she would probably awaken in the minds of both uncle

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BY NO FAULT OF THEIR OWN.

her usual little nod, as she had not seen him before that day.

He muttered something she did not catch, in reply, and flung himself down beside her on the log of wood which formed the seat; tossing off his wide-awake as he did so.

"I'm in for it!" thought the tormented Joan—she really considered herself tormented at that moment. "No more quiet for me. Oh! very well!" and unconsciously a quick, impatient, little sigh finished her mental remark.

Her companion turned suddenly towards her with a hasty gesture, while his eyes absolutely flashed again. From one cause or other he was in a very bad humour.

"What's that for?" he asked, abruptly—almost savagely. "Don't you want me to be here? Perhaps I'd better go," and he sprang quickly to his feet, and caught up his hat. She looked up at him in mute surprise; and the joking words she would have tried to turn his wrath away with at any other time, remained unuttered on her parted lips. "Well—why don't you speak?" he said again, with the same vehemence. "I said perhaps I'd better go; shall I?"

"Really, Mr. Draycott," returned Joan, recovering her voice and speaking rather stiffly, while a cold look settled down on her face as the surprise left it, "you must please yourself. It can scarcely matter to me which you do."

"Then I stay," as abruptly as before, reseating himself beside her, and giving his hat a fling that sent it rolling down the little incline on which the tree stood.

Joan drew herself together in a decided manner. This young man *must* be checked. He was becoming intolerably bearish. "He has sought me —not I him: and he may either talk or be silent; I shall not help him," she said to herself, longing to go on with her book, but not liking to. It seemed so rude.

Doing her best to look profoundly indifferent as to the fact of his very existence, she closed her volume, crossed her ungloved hands on it, and turning her head away from him somewhat, looked straight before her at the green, sunny meadows, and the blue sky overhanging the swiftly moving river, whose pleasant, gurgling sound could almost be heard where they were.

"How very beautiful the earth was," she mused, as her eyes rested on the distant grey mountains, and then mounted higher until they reached the sky. "How far more beautiful *that* was, though!" and the very moment she lifted her head and looked up she felt an inexpressible sensation, as if something had fallen off her — some cloying, hurtful burden had slipped quietly away from her, and she was at once lightened and calmed.

Try it yourself, reader, if you doubt what is here alleged. It is as true as it seems strange that, if we lift only our bodily eyes towards heaven, and gaze steadily upwards for the space of a few seconds only, a singular sense of the insignificance of all here on earth, and a soothing calm, steals insensibly over one, and helps to calm the most ruffled spirit. In the opal-tinted west one or two soft, little white clouds were floating in the hazy air, but all [redacted] of the sky was spotlessly, peerlessly b[redacted]

could see a very wide expanse of it, too, owing to the nature of that part of the country. There was something in the look of the sky that made her think of Stephen. Poor Stephen—poor boy! She began wondering if he could see her there, sitting with his brother beneath the tree where he had often lounged a pleasant hour away with her; within sight of the river by whose side they had made many pleasant boating and fishing excursions. Had *he* large, white wings like the pictures she had seen of angels? and did he know her dead sister and dear old nurse, and talk to them of her? or had he forgotten her altogether? She hoped not. It was one of her weaknesses—one shared, however, by many people—that she mightily wished every one to like and think well of her.

The irritability of her mood had passed away, and the gentleness, even seriousness of her face, showed that her thoughts were miles away from her companion, when a restless movement of his attracted her attention, and she looked down towards him. For the moment her eyes, being dazzled, did not clearly distinguish him from the surrounding objects, but when they became more accustomed to the lesser amount of light, she thought his face wore a very strange and peculiar expression; and half mystified, she stared hard at him, seeing, however, that whatever the look signified, it had passed quickly away. He was leaning forward, gazing fixedly at her, seeming much as usual. She met his eye calmly for an instant, and then looked over his head at the fields again.

"Well?" he said then, speaking much more quietly than at first, "are you expecting me to congratulate you on your improved prospects, Miss Joan?"

"My improved prospects?" she repeated, a little surprised. Could he know of her letter from Mrs. Miles about the governess situation in Otago?

"Yes. Don't pretend not to know what I mean. To be mistress of Aynard Park seems to me to be much preferable to your proposed Hegira to New Zealand."

"Oh!" said Joan, coolly, though she changed colour, "is that what you mean?"

"Yes. Am I to congratulate you?"

"Well, I think it would be rather premature to do so as yet. Pray, Mr. Draycott, may I ask how you came to know anything about—about——"

"Your aunt told me. I have only just left the cottage."

Joan became very much disturbed and fidgetty.

"I wish she—I wish she hadn't said anything about it," she muttered, half to herself.

"Why? If it had not been looked upon as an *affaire finie*, of course she would have held her tongue concerning it."

"It is unfair to me and very unfair to Mr. Aynard," went on Joan, uneasily, and looking a little wounded. "Nothing is settled, and she talks as if it were. I do wish nothing had been said," and she was so much annoyed that she never thought of commanding her face more, so as not to show clearly what was passing in her mind.

"What do you mean? The man has offered

himself, and you have accepted him, or intend to do so. What more would you have settled? The wedding day? That can hardly take place immediately, if Sir Thomas dies soon."

Joan nearly jumped up off the log at hearing this.

"Mr. Draycott, I don't wish to be rude, but I must really ask you not to speak any more on this subject, at present at all events. It is not right—indeed it is not at all well. Even with a near relation—I should hesitate to discuss it; how much more with a stranger?"

"A stranger? So you call me a stranger, Joan Thornherst?"

"Well, you know what I mean. One who is no relation—who cannot be supposed to have an interest in what concerns me."

"And I have no interest in you?"

"Oh, I suppose you have a sort of an interest, such as you would have in anyone you see often. Any more than that, such as you would entertain towards any one of your *friends*, for instance, you cannot have; or, if you have, you take very queer ways of showing it."

This very determinedly said, for Miss Thornherst was beginning to feel aggrieved.

"What do you mean by saying that? *You* are queer enough, heaven knows, without any one else being so."

"Why, I consider you are sometimes very snappy and ill-tempered—begging your pardon, Mr. Draycott," and her eyes gleamed at him, half in fun and half in earnest lest she had spoken too plainly.

"You provoke me. You are often abrupt and

cold. You treat me like an utter stranger. You never talk to me as you did to Stephen—never."

"*He* was very different to you," she answered, as the tears started into her eyes. It was the first time he had mentioned his brother's name to her since that morning when his sudden death had been announced to her, and his voice had sounded hard, and his eyes were unsoftened as he spoke.

"He was so very different," she repeated, controlling her voice.

"What would *he* have said—what would *he* have thought if he had known you were about to sell yourself to a man old enough to be your father, and for whom you cannot care a rush," he continued, looking keenly at her as he spoke.

This was dreadful! and Joan turned sharply on him, her whole face flushed with indignation.

"Mr. Draycott, you have *no right* to speak to me so!" she said, proudly, "and you must not do it."

"No right? I have as much right as he would have had."

"*He* loved me too well not to trust me, not to think that everything I did would be well."

"And you call *that* love? Child—fool!"

"Yes, I do," and Joan spoke almost angrily. "I hate being snapped at and scolded, and I hate people who do so, too."

"Oh, I understand. Mr. Aynard is more the style of person you prefer, after all, perhaps."

"Mr. Draycott, if you mention that gentleman's name once again, rude as you may think me, I shall get up and leave you," and Joan's eyes flashed

resolutely, though she was confused and blushing to the tips of her ears.

"Very well. We'll talk of something else."

Silence, however; an offended one on Joan's part. After a pause—"Were you reading when I came up to you?"

"Yes—no. I *had* been reading."

"I wonder why girls are so fond of love stories? There does not appear much of the sentiment about them in these days. A man is only looked at for what he has in his pockets."

Scornful silence on the part of Miss Joan, who disdains any rejoinder or observation on this speech.

"Tell me truly, have you ever seen any one you thought you could like—love well enough to be his wife, I mean?" and Mr. Draycott bent towards her eagerly, as if really anxious for her answer, with every trace of sarcasm or irritation gone on his part.

She was about to answer in a sharp and emphatic "No!" when some secret thought flashed across her mind, and her face unbending, she laughed a little; turning on him the only really coquettish look she had ever given him, right into his very eyes, which were quite close to her.

"I wont tell you!" she cried, and laughed again, a little low laugh, as a warm flood of colour rushed over her face, and she looked away once more over the landscape. "No, indeed I wont!"

"Why not?"

"Because—— Oh, because I wont," shyly, and dropping her eyes on her book. "Now is the time,

if he *really* is thinking of me. What fun," she thought to herself; but the next second, seized with a panic lest her jest should by any chance be a true one, she jumped up, and taking her hat, put it on her head; then tucked her volume under her arm, and held out her hand to say good-bye.

"I must go now. It is getting late," she said hurriedly. Her companion had risen simultaneously with, and had come close to her; having taken the hand she extended to him, and then looking down at her. Never had she looked prettier—rarely more sweet and soft. Bright as fresh-gathered rose-leaves were her cheeks, and surely the daintiest little red mouth in the world was never puckered up into more bewitching curves of mingled mischief and nervousness. The air was stirring in her short wavy hair; and very demurely her round bright eyes were drooped beneath their mobile, delicately arched brows. Very pretty and roguish, and sweet, too, in spite of her sudden spurt of fun, was Joan; and Mr. Draycott, gazing at her, fairly lost his head.

With a quick movement he had cast his right arm around her waist, and drawn her passionately yet quietly towards him. It was done so swiftly, though so gently, that she hardly perceived that he was doing it—only when it was done. And when she looked up, in a whirlwind of emotions, among which even surprise played an inferior part to a very decided alarm, she found she was virtually a prisoner in the audacious embrace of the most dreaded person of her acquaintance; with whom she hardly remembered to have exchanged two words that were not

connected with the species of guerilla warfare that had never ceased between them since the day on which they became acquainted. The truth flashed upon her at last. Poor Stephen's jealous hints—her uncle's plain assertions were true then; and she had been as blind as a mole or a bat! Quicker than lightning all her previous ideas concerning him were scattered to the wind by meeting his intent dark eyes that glowed as with the warmth and brightness of fire, making hers, scared, sink and fall before their fixed gaze with a feeling as if scorched by a passing flash of flame. And what was it that had caused the trembling thrill—the stinging, darting sensation that running quickly up her arm communicated itself to her whole body? Was it from the same reason that the strong muscular brown hands that clasped her wrists, also shook for a moment like those of a palsied man? And Mr. Draycott's heart was beating as loudly as her own, she could hear, too. For one second she had lost her surprise in a mingled awe and fascination, and stood motionless within the charmed circle thrown around her, entirely subdued by the intensity and power of the feelings she had awakened in the man beside her. In the breathlessness of the silence produced by strongest emotions, the two stood there as deaf and blind to all around them, save their two selves, as if they had been really dead, when in truth they were only living more intensely than they had ever done before.

Then the silence was broken—a silence which had held her tongue-tied and motionless, and a voice she scarcely recognised, so low and soft was it, made so wholly musical by the magic of love, so wholly

passionate by the stirred depths of a strong emotion, whispered close to her ear, "Joan!"

There was no need to say more. The intonation of that one word was sufficient to tell her all the eloquence that his heart dictated, yet which his lips were powerless to utter.

But it roused her from her species of half-stupefied, half-fascinated trance; and with a stinging start, her suspended senses awoke up into bewildered life again.

"Let me go—let me go!" she uttered, beneath her breath; for her voice was hoarse and strange from her great and sudden emotions of mingled astonishment and fear.

"Joan, my love, my darling—you will come to me now, will you not? You will love me a little, knowing how much I love you? Joan—Joan! I love you—will you be my wife?" And she felt the grasp of his arms around her tighten convulsively when he had said this; holding her to him as if she had said "Yes" already—as if he were very sure of what her answer would be. What had come to Mr. Draycott's voice, too? Could it be really his? It was so very soft and pleasant—so very wooing and sweet.

"No, thank you—I'm much obliged, but I'd rather not," she said, a little incoherently; trying with all her might to keep her head cool and to speak as usual.

He made no remark, and Joan waited for him to release her, fully expecting he would take his arm away at once, when she had replied to him.

"What kind of answer do you call that?" he

said quietly, at last, after what seemed to her to be an immense minute.

"One in the negative—I mean no," she responded simply, wondering he did not understand. Joan was no real coquette in her heart, or she could never have looked up into his eyes as freely and unsuspectingly as she did then as she spoke. Child that she was, when she had quieted the beating of her own heart, she involuntarily supposed that he, being older and wiser, would have composed his as quickly; not knowing, or not remembering that, strong as men are, their passions are often stronger; that when well reined-in they go steadily in harness, but once they take the bit in their teeth, they sometimes carry their rider further than he either wished or intended to go.

"You speak as if I had asked you concerning the merest trifle. Think, *this* time, before you answer. It is a serious thing to play with the happiness of a man's whole life. Don't look so scared," more quietly, seeing, for he had not once moved his eyes from her face, how she had slowly turned white—white even to her lips. "Will you be my wife, Joan?"

"No, thank you—I am very sorry—but I'd much rather not," she repeated. "Wont you please let me go now? It is getting late," and she tried, very gently, to disengage her hands and seem composed, although she was trembling very much.

"Not yet: presently. I have something to say to you."

But he did not go on: and Joan, recovering somewhat from the surprise and tumult of the

situation, began to feel very uncomfortable indeed; and looked proportionably miserable, averting her eyes from him, and turning away her head towards the trees; feeling nevertheless, with a shrinking deprecation, that his looks were fastened on her still, as if they would pierce her to the depths of her soul. If she had wanted to tell an untruth, she could hardly have ventured to do so with those eyes upon her, she felt.

Looking down on the fair rosebud face that was so near to him, on the averted, reluctant eyes, the rounded firm cheeks and lips half offended, half alarmed, his momentary composure gave way; and he clasped her again in his arms, and pressed her tighter and ever tighter to his breast, until she grew nearly distracted, with all her first fears revived.

"Never, Joan—never! I will not let you go from me until I can make you understand how I love you. You must promise to be my wife——"

"I wont—I wont! You must let me go—you *must,* I say! Take your hands off me directly, Mr. Draycott! How dare you?" and fully roused into the liveliest indignation, though still keeping her head, Joan's eyes flashed forked lightning up into his. All consideration for him was gone; how *dared* he behave so to her?

"How dare I? I would dare do much more for *you,* Joan. Don't struggle so. I *will not* permit you to go away. You will only hurt without doing yourself any good. See, your wrists are getting quite pink."

She looked at them for a second as they were

turning and twisting themselves in the grasp of his strong hands, and the sight made her more angry still.

"Let me go, I say! Baldwin Draycott, let me go! It's a great shame; I'll box your ears—I will."

"Don't see how you can, Joan, when I am holding both your hands in mine. Come now, don't struggle so; I *must* hurt you if you keep trying to get away so. You may as well bring your mind down to your situation, for I've got you here and mean to keep you for awhile."

"I'll tell my uncle," cried Joan, passionately, flushing all over her face and throat an angry red, and fairly stamping her foot on the ground.

"I don't care what you tell him, Joan, so long as you tell him you have promised to be my wife."

"I'll tell him nothing of the kind. *Your* wife, indeed! I'll never be your wife. Let go my hands, sir; it is no use trying to frighten me—let me go directly;" and she began to pull and turn her hands with renewed vigour at the very thoughts of such a thing as he had just suggested.

"And why not, pray?"

"Because I wont: because I hate you—there! *Now* will you let me go?" triumphantly and boldly, glowering up in the dark face bent over her with every pretty feature ablaze with fiery, uncurbed indignation.

"No. I must have a different answer first, Joan. What puts you in such a fury? You see I am calm, and you are flying about like a wild thing."

"I *shall* go mad if you keep me here much longer," she gasped, actually panting for breath.

"Well, you can't do any harm, for you're in a sort of strait-waistcoat, eh Joan?" and Baldwin looked wrathfully amused.

"There's old Matthew!" she exclaimed, with reanimated hope, as her eye caught sight of the old shepherd on the other side of the river; passing along, as was his wont, with his head bent down, and his stick under his arm. "I'll call to him, and then everybody will know."

"By all means; call away! You forget he is stone-deaf."

She stopped suddenly and looked straight up at him, into his very eyes, refusing to credit the evidence of her senses; and at this involuntary appeal, so purely naïve, and as if her last hope had gone, her face was so comic in its grievous dismay and disappointment that Mr. Draycott's earnestness gave way a little.

Now, at no time of her life had Joan ever been famous for self-control, and when she saw that, across the mixture of strong feelings, each struggling for ascendancy over the other in his face, a mischievous smile began to shine out, she fairly lost *her* head. To crown every other indignity, he was laughing at her openly—to her very face.

Her unbounded illimitable surprise at the whole affair had beclouded her understanding and completely upset her ordinary theory, that to be ladylike one must be calm and self-possessed. She was furious, and she both looked and spoke so. The composure given her by education and instinct was scattered to the winds, and a wild, untamed little savage Joan showed herself to be; being driven

almost frantic by her continued detention, and her increasing, despairing conviction that she could not get away unless her captor chose. Not a vestige remained of a quiet, well-behaved young English lady in the demeanour of Miss Thornhurst at this moment: and after struggling for some mad seconds in a most undignified manner she paused from sheer exhaustion, and swelling with an indignation so great that it seemed as though it would choke her, she subsided into a sulky dignity, tempered with self pity.

"You're quiet now, that's right," commented Mr. Baldwin Draycott, approvingly, contemplating his justly ruffled captive with a queer mixture of expressions in his face. "Now tell me (for I tell you fairly that I mean to make the most of the present opportunity——"

"You'd better—for you'll never get another," muttered the unsubdued Joan.

"What is that you say?" giving her a little admonitory shake, as he spoke;—"and that I don't intend to let you go before I've had it out with you, once for all"—"Good gracious! what an expression for a would-be lover," crossed Joan's agitated mind comically at this second, "and you'll just tell me what reason you have, or think you have, for giving me such a decided refusal without a moment's consideration. Or rather, you attempt to give me one, but I refuse to take it."

"It is the only answer you'll get;" retorted Joan. "Baldwin Draycott, are you insane that you behave thus to me? Talk of Savages, indeed! There isn't a greater Wretch in England than you are

—there!" and she stamped again on the ground, with great gusto, feeling painfully impotent, and at a decided disadvantage compared with her antagonist.

It is an undeniable fact that the person who "takes the bull by the horns," as the phrase goes, has generally very much the best of the situation; and Mr. Draycott fully recognised and enjoyed the power he had so gained. He had cooled down somewhat, as Joan warmed up; and, with a kind of vexed amusement, held and looked at her a little as a girl holds and looks at some pretty angry kitten whom she loves, but dare not release, or it would scratch her. When people choose to do anything very startling and outrageous—as this proceeding of his certainly was—the most usually composed persons find themselves much at a loss what to say or do. Her principal feeling was that of steadily-increasing astonishment at the position in which she found herself. She *could not* believe she was awake—she *must* be dreaming!

She was inly questioning with herself if *biting* his hands would do any good towards freeing herself, when her state of comparative quiescence was turned into one of frantic rage and terror; for her distressed face was suddenly raised and covered with kisses. This was too much! and Joan's fortitude gave way at last in a passion of indignant tears. The more she sobbed, however, the more Baldwin kissed—with a sort of wild, savage passion, that had nearly as much anger in it as love; and in the meanwhile poured a torrent of vehement speeches into her distracted ears.

"He loved her—he loved, and no one else

should dare to do so! no one should have her but he! If she even dared to think of marrying any one else, he would shoot her—*shoot* her—did she hear? No one should have his darling, his own love, but himself! no one! If she were not his, she should not live to belong to any one else;" and so on—and so on; until Joan's passion of tears had spent itself somewhat, and for very want of breath, he paused.

"I thought you told me once, 'you never cried before people;'" he next observed. Thus, after a moment's silence and in quite a different tone, partially releasing her as he spoke.

By this time, to her exceeding discomfiture, Joan was feeling her nose beginning to swell and get red, and was miserably aware of some of her tears trickling into her mouth, so that she actually tasted them—and very bitter they were, too.

"*You're* not people—you—you're a Demon!" said Joan, between wrath and misery being scarcely able to get out her words.

"Well, take my advice, and never cry even before 'demons,' who may have just as keen an eye for the beautiful as 'people.' If you could only see yourself now, you'd be quite astonished at the alteration a few tears make in the best-looking face."

"I don't suppose I look uglier than you do when you cry;" returned Joan, ruffled, and with considerable asperity—no one likes uncomplimentary remarks on their personal appearance. "Baldwin Draycott, I believe you must be a raving lunatic to dare to behave to any one as you have behaved to me this afternoon!"

"And I don't believe you believe any such thing;" he retorted, "for if you really thought that, you wouldn't dare risk your telling me so. Why, in that case, I should probably *bite* you, and then you'd go mad too. I declare, I've half a mind to shake you for telling such a story; and you stand there looking as naughty as it is possible for even *you* to look! I am really getting angry with you, Joan. Don't be foolish."

"I believe you want to kill me," sobbed Joan, inconsolably; "and then you'll be *hanged* for it; you cruel, bad man!"

"Well, that idea—the last one I mean—ought to afford you some comfort, though, as before, I refuse my credence to your first assertion;" said Baldwin, "but it is a very good way to take to provoke me to do so—it is, upon my word—by behaving like such a baby. I ask you a fair question, and you shall give me a fair answer, if you stand here for a week."

This last was a fine specimen of a sweeping style of language; and upset as Joan was, she felt rather inclined to laugh at it.

"What other answer can you expect me to give you?" she asked, sulkily. "If I said 'yes,' now, I should unsay it as soon as I went away. I wouldn't marry you if you were a king. There! talk about my *selling* myself after that, if you can! Why, don't you know," she cried, warming again, and looking up with all that supreme confidence in herself that most young people have felt, once in their lives, at all events, and a proud challenging of him to convince her of the one sin above all others

she knew she was not very likely to fall into; "that that is why I am taking my fate in my own hands, and leaving all I have ever known or care for—that are left—and going away from England to work for my bread and lay up money for my old age, thousands of miles away? For I am in earnest—real earnest! Perhaps you thought Uncle Frank was only joking the other day, but he was speaking the sober truth."

"And you mean to say you are going to Otago?" very slowly, and entirely releasing her as he spoke.

"Of course I do? Only it is a secret—I promised auntie I would never speak of it to any one."

"And she is unwilling you should go, and so wants you to marry here?"

"She is the very kindest person in the world;" said Joan, evasively. "I don't see why I should tell you anything about what she wishes or doesn't wish, Mr. Draycott; and mind! you are not to say anything about my going to Otago to her."

"Nonsense, Joan! formality of that kind is done with from henceforth between us. Each word you say convinces me more strongly that I shall have my wish some day. Every man is fooled once in his life by a pretty face, they say; and I suppose *my* fate was fixed when you were sent here. But I am not going to be fooled entirely. Even if you go to Otago, I will follow you. I would follow you to the ends of the world until I obtain you as my wife."

To describe Miss Thornherst's aspect of horror as she heard this cool avowal would be impossible; and to her astounded ear, the accents were those of

simple truth, too. She gave a sort of gasp, like a half-maddened fish who has leaped too far out of the water, and begins to fancy he shall die if he does not get back quickly again.

"Who is talking nonsense now?" she cried, triumphantly, and tossing her head defiantly at him. "Why, you couldn't leave England."

"Couldn't I!"

"No; and it would be no use if you did. Do you think I would ever marry you unless I loved you, when I had rejected others far richer and nobler?"

"Then you mean to reject him?" he said eagerly, passing over the end of her sentence.

"That I shall certainly not tell you!" very promptly. "And now, Mr. Draycott, I suppose I may go home?"

"I am glad at least of that—for I know what your answer will be," he said, not replying to her question in words, and turning to walk with her.

Joan was so exceedingly pleased to find herself on her homeward way, that she passed over the presumption in the remark, and hurried on, thinking that she could not consider herself as safe until out of the precincts of the park. But when her mind went back to the occurrences of the last few minutes, the roses, hot and furious, ebbed up warm and tingling all over the face she felt she could scarcely have the courage ever to turn towards her companion again, however long might be her sojourn at Radford; and her possible journey to Otago seemed the only sure spot her mind had to rest on. "He said he'd shoot me if I married Mr. Aynard," she said to herself,

with a sensation of fear that he meant to keep his word stealing over her.

They walked on in total silence. Suddenly she came to a pause and turned towards her companion, though she did not look at him.

"Mr. Draycott," she said in a low voice, "don't come any further with me. Believe me when I tell you—*it is of no use.*"

Baldwin looked at her, and folded his arms with a sufficiently expressive gesture.

"When I once make up my mind about anything, I don't often alter it," he said. "Perseverance does wonders in this world, Joan; and I intend to persevere."

For the first time during this memorable conversation, she began to quake inwardly as she heard him speak thus. Knowing what that virtue had done and was still to do in her own case, she nearly felt as if she had better resign herself at once to what she feared she would be obliged to come to in the end!

Turning from him with a pettish gesture of head and shoulder, she spoke in an uncomfortable sort of a tone—

"It is very silly to say such things!"

"No, it is not," contradicted Mr. Draycott, in his most directly uncompromising manner. "It will come true, see if it does not. '*Qui vivra verra.*'"

Joan turned on him fiercely—

"I *hate* self-confidence!" she cried angrily, and with a slight stamp of her foot.

"And quite right, too, when there are no grounds for it," rejoined Baldwin, equably; "but my con-

fidence is entirely different to what you would make it out to be; and, even if you dislike it now —which, by-the-bye, there is no necessity for doing if you disbelieve in it—you'll change your mind some day;" and a glance, half calm, half fiery, was directed at her, which spoke so much of strong feelings but partly subdued, that Joan turned hot and cold in nearly the same moment, with mortifying reminiscences of the occurrences of the afternoon.

It was enraging—very; and Miss Thornherst was feeling desperate. She didn't know *what* to do or say so as to put down this monstrous offender in a sufficiently effectual manner, although she yearned to do so. She suffered painfully from a feeling of impotency, and groaned in spirit over her want of *savoir faire*. Unable to see her way clearly to anything annihilating, she perforce contented herself by tossing her head haughtily, and saying in an impressive voice, "We shall see."

"Yes," said Baldwin, provokingly, and mimicking her gesture with unblushing effontery, "we *shall* see!"

Although Joan was looking straight before her, the side of her left retina marked his mocking action, and for a moment a comical feeling within her arose and nearly betrayed her to laughter. But she remembered her outraged dignity just in time; and, drawing in the rebellious corners of her mouth, she stalked on silently, in a very perturbed state of mind.

They had reached the lodge-gates by this time, and suddenly coming [illegible] she turned round, and gave a quick, [illegible] up the avenue.

"What is that for? Have you lost any thing?" asked Mr. Draycott.

"I was only looking my last at this part of the park, answered Joan, majestically; "for I have been here for the last time, to-day."

"Why?" asked Baldwin, a slight look of anxiety crossing his face. "What makes you say that? I never knew you were given to presentiments before."

"Because, *of course*, I shall never—never come here again—never any more," answered Joan, firmly, "after your behaviour—your abominably ungentlemanly behaviour of this afternoon." And Miss Thornherst's cheeks flamed brightly anew, highly to her discomfiture. "But then," as she told herself, "what else had she been doing all that wretched and exciting last two hours?"

"Is that all?" said Baldwin, with composure. "There's no knowing; some people and things change wonderfully if you do but give them time. One has only to be patient."

Joan flashed a look at him, but withdrew it as quickly, as she plainly perceived he preferred receiving any kind of a glance to none.

"I can't think what makes me open my mouth to say a word to you," she observed, angrily. "I ought not to permit you to be near me, even."

"Well, that last is not your fault—only your misfortune—for certainly you have done your best to prevent it. And as to talking to me, why, I suppose your feelings get too many for you;" and Baldwin shook his head gravely. "However, here's your uncle's iron Rubicon—the gate of his

garden—and now our walk must come to an end. I'm awfully sorry—aren't you?" and lifting his hat he ran his fingers through his hair, meanwhile closely eyeing his fair companion, so that not the slightest variation of her face could by any means escape his observation.

Joan looked up at him, fully intending to bestow upon him a glance of solemn scorn, so greatly was her righteous wrath rekindled at the unparalleled audacity of his question. In some way or other, however—she never could quite account for it afterwards, although she took herself severely to task about it—she wasn't able to acquit herself satisfactorily at all, and it was a very lame affair, lasting a very short time. But it was not a stupid thing for him to say, if he wanted her to look up at him, if simply to give additional force to the indignant denial that he expected.

She dropped her eyes again, and spake not; she literally felt tongue-tied for want of a sufficiently scathing thing to say.

"Silence gives consent," quoth Baldwin, after waiting a moment. "Then you *are* sorry?"

"I'm not!" flashed Joan, quick as lightning. "I hate you! Go away!"

"Not without shaking hands," said Baldwin, coolly.

"Shake hands with *you?*" Joan could say no more in high wrath.

"Yes. Don't you see your aunt in the garden looking at us? and there is one of the servants at one of the top windows, who has an eye in our direction. You are very foolish if you make a scene; for, I tell you, I *will* [redacted]"

Staggered in her mind about that very feminine resource of "boxing his ears," which she hastily determined to do if he attempted to touch her, by the consciousness of the fact that two pairs of eyes were upon her, Joan succumbed from sheer indecision; retaining only enough presence of mind to endeavour to snatch her hand quietly away. This, however, she found she was unable to do without signs of an open struggle; and inwardly writhing with a mixture of indignation and despair that was almost comical to her when she recalled the circumstance afterwards, she stood there beside the gate, painfully aware that the attitude of herself and companion looked suspiciously lover-like. For *her* head was turned over her shoulder, glancing apprehensively towards the house, while *he* was holding her hand with no appearance of immediately releasing it.

"Good afternoon," said Baldwin, aloud. "Don't forget to tell your uncle that I shall come to him to-morrow morning, before he goes out."

"No—*I wont!*" said Joan, passionately, and setting her teeth. "Let go my hand, or I *must* call out!"

Baldwin laughed, but not in a pleasant manner; there was more recklessness and defiance in the note than mirth.

"I shall certainly come, however," he said, as he lifted his hat once more. "You know the good old saying—

'Patience and Perseverance
Got a wife for his Reverence.'

Permit me," and he opened the gate, at last allowing Miss Thornherst to pass through.

Calling all her scattered forces to aid her in stiffening her limbs—for she felt actually limp with self-pity—Joan marched up the garden-walk with all the dignity at her command. Much impaired, however, was her composure at feeling certain of Baldwin remaining still at the gate watching her; and despairingly telling herself that of course her aunt and Fanny would put their own construction on his so doing, she made up her mind to "have a run for it," in common parlance; so she quickened her movements, and ran up the steps leading to the hall door. Her evil genius, however, insisting upon particularly distinguishing himself on that day, arranged affairs so that she caught her foot in her dress and nearly fell into the hall—to her exceeding aggravation. Snatching at her offending skirts, she fled upstairs with the most ignominious sense of a complete and undeserved defeat, from a battle into which, from no fault of her own, she had been reluctantly entrapped; and a horrid thought, too, darted into her mind as she gained the sanctuary of her own room—"Did not some people opine that falling upstairs was a sign of a wedding?"

CHAPTER II.

TROUBLES.

THE rest of the day Joan passed in pensive meditation on the weakness and shortcomings of mankind in general and of Mr. Draycott in particular. Her own conduct on the especial occasion of that afternoon's phenomena also underwent a strict scrutiny.

During the evening she had been more distinguished by her silent industry than her ordinary loquacity. She brought down a large piece of unfinished wool-work, an undertaking of Mrs. Essington's which had proved too much for her patience, and which she had turned over to her niece to complete; and to this she stuck, resisting all her uncle's invitations to play chess or backgammon by protesting that the sofa-cushion had been hanging about for so long she was quite tired of seeing it, and was resolved to finish it up as quickly as possible. Stitching carefully away, she sat with her back to the candles and the light falling on her work from over her shoulder, with a very *olla podrida* of thoughts chasing each other up and down in her busy brain, and only interrupted every now and then by loud proclamations of "Bezique!" "Double bezique, Frank!" "Marriage of hearts, and hearts are trumps—forty for me,"

from where her uncle and aunt were engaged in playing at the other side of the table. Her little pussy had come mewing and purring round her feet to be taken up and petted, and from her station in Joan's lap poked a small wet nose against the fingers that were flying up and down the canvas with such business-like quickness; but excepting a few abstracted caresses she did not obtain much notice from her mistress. "It is very fine to be *you*, miss," Joan thought, looking down into the dark-green phosphorescent eyes that shone out of her kitten's furry little face. "*You* haven't two offers of marriage—and one to go to Otago as governess—lying heavy and undigested on your mind like underdone suet pudding. *You* may purr, but *I* must think." And she sewed away harder than ever after this temporary relapse.

And she *did* think, but could get no nearer to making up her mind than she had in the afternoon, principally as regarded Mr. Aynard's proposal. Mr. Draycott's—she looked upon as the worst part over, though she started and trembled at every step she heard passing the house, lest it should chance to be that supreme offender. The day of grace anent the former was fast drawing to a close. To-morrow her uncle would know of the proposal, and she greatly feared the latter would also present himself to Mr. Essington and plead his own cause.

"Must I marry Mr. Aynard in order to be rid of Baldwin Draycott," wondered Joan, flushing hotly and turning as cold again. "I don't see what else to do if I lose this Otago affair. Oh, if I could only be brave and take the plunge! I

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soundly until the bright sun looked in at her window the next morning and woke her up.

The affairs of the day wore a decidedly ameliorated aspect to her mind when she opened her eyes and looked round the pretty, comfortable room she had passed so many happy months in. *Of course,* Mr. Draycott would profit by the calm reflection that morning generally brings, and wisely ignore the part he had played in the Chesney Oak drama—"And if he did so ignore it, which he would be *sure* to do, *that* trouble would be ended," Joan comfortingly told herself, as she opened her window and looked out over the fair autumn landscape where the blue mists were lying in every hollow and woody dell. The smoke was rising in faint curls against the clear, bright sky from the scattered cottages lying dotted in the lanes around Radford; while the sheep in the field opposite bleated and tinkled their bells in a most musical way, as they nibbled at some big white turnips the shepherd had thrown them. Joan picked a fresh pink monthly rose from the leafy boughs that climbed round her window; and pressing its sweet dew-wet face to her lips, put it in her dress, and went down to breakfast with a pretty well composed countenance, considering what was behind and before her. "What will auntie think, when I tell her—which I shall some day—how that Dreadful Man hugged and kissed me yesterday?" was her reflection, half comic, half serious, as she waited for the Essingtons to make their appearance for breakfast. "And as to Mr. Aynard—oh! I must get her to manage that for me."

The meal passed over without anything unusual

occurring. From her uncle's manner, Joan saw her aunt had not yet said aught to him concerning the letter she had received the day before; and, as he started out for a walk into Lymestone directly afterwards, she breathed more freely in thinking to herself that her aunt would have to put off telling him until the afternoon.

Quietly, to all appearance, the morning passed away: Mrs. Essington being occupied with various little matters which their reduced scale of housekeeping had devolved upon her, and in solitary state Joan habiting the drawing-room, working at her sofa cushion—she found she could not collect her mind enough for her music—and trying with all her might to make herself decide on accepting Mr. Aynard's offer.

What a sure and delightful way of cutting the Gordian knot of all her troubles! Was she utterly mad? What would her father say when he came to know of her folly? And her sisters? But for them she did not care one doit, though she told herself she should heartily enjoy being a great lady while they still went jogging on their way on foot. There was not one single drawback to such a marriage, except—that she feared she should not be happy.

But how about the Dreadful Man? for by this emphatic cognomen Joan opined Baldwin Draycott would ever remain designated in her own mind. The morning was, it was true, passing quietly away, but then he might chance to come in the afternoon; and something ought to be done to put her aunt on her guard, and, through her, her uncle, *in case* he

dared to make his appearance, as he declared he should do.

What *would* her aunt say? And then something ought to be decided about this governess place, too. It was three weeks since she had received the first letter; and a week since the one came in which she was asked for an interview. She had answered, saying she would appoint one in a few days, hoping to be able to persuade her aunt into letting her go.

While thinking over this with herself, the door opened, and Mr. Essington entered. Joan's heart began to thump against her side, and she yearned to look up to try to discover by his face if the dreaded proposal had actually come or not. But being aware she was looking nervous and conscious, she went on with her work industriously, and left it to her uncle to begin the conversation—if there was to be one. Perhaps, after all, he might have only come into the room for a book or the newspaper; at which thought she breathed unconsciously freer.

But no; Mr. Essington went over to the bow-window near which his niece was seated, and flung himself back in an armchair with an air of mingled importance and satisfaction that filled her mind with the direst prognostications of coming ill. She was beginning to be apprehensive that either one or the other of the proposals she would in the end be persuaded or scolded into accepting. Her aunt, she knew, was on Mr. Aynard's side; her uncle, quite as strongly, on that of his favourite, Draycott. She hardly dare offend both by refusing her two suitors; and yet—well, come what might, she would most assuredly have nothing whatever to say to Baldwin

Draycott! That she felt resolved about! Her uncle and aunt might both rage and storm at her, and even put her out of their house; but she felt she could be very firm indeed when that offending person was concerned. Still, conscious that she would sooner or later have an uncomfortable time about affairs she commenced to wish they had been at the bottom of the sea before ever she had become seriously mixed up in them, she remained, stitching demurely, and as quiet as a mouse; awaiting with dread the moment when Mr. Essington should commence.

"What an industrious young woman!" quoth her uncle, after a minute's silence, during which she *felt* he was looking at her with an amused smile. "What an excellent wife you'll make, Joan! 'She looketh well to the ways of her household, and eateth not the bread of idleness,' eh? You'll be a perfect treasure to Baldwin Draycott."

That name acted like a firebrand thrown into a haystack. Joan's face flushed crimson—eyes, ears, and throat included; and the heat of her conscious cheeks could, she felt, be only compared to that of a peat fire.

"Whoever I marry—if I ever do such a thing—will not want his wife to look after the 'ways of his household,'" she observed, wishing she had more courage than she was naturally endowed with.

"But Baldwin will be a poor man, Joan; he wont have as many hundreds as his father and brother had thousands, he tells me. You must make up your mind to——"

"But, Uncle Frank!" burst forth his niece, un-

able to bear any more misconstruction, "I'm not going to marry him at all! Why do you speak as though I were?"

"But you are;" and Mr. Essington spoke rather determinedly. "He has just left me; we have been talking it over for the last hour or more."

"He may have talked it over a hundred hours, and it wont bring the fact a bit more forward," said Joan, now getting a little paler as she saw how confident her uncle was. "He is a most audacious, inconsiderate, wicked man! I wonder how he dare come and speak to you—after—after——" and a great beating and throbbing of her heart jumping up in her throat almost choked her, as she tried to finish her speech.

"Hallo! What is the matter *now?* What queer adjectives, 'audacious — inconsiderate — wicked!' Have it out with him before his face, girl! Don't call him names behind his back. What's got your prickles up? Has he done anything to offend you? It is early hours to begin fighting."

"Look here, Uncle Frank," said Joan, resolutely, dropping all pretence at sewing, and presenting a scarlet and troubled face with bright, distressed eyes to Mr. Essington, who had turned himself quite round in his chair and was eyeing her curiously; "you'd hate him as much as I do, if you only knew how he behaved to me yesterday! You wouldn't wonder at all at my refusing him—as I certainly shall; and only that the days of 'pistols for two, and coffee for one' are gone past, I suppose, *you'd call him out*—there! That is what you would do."

"Airth and seas!" ejaculated Mr. Essington (who

was partial to Americanisms), in a surprised and incredulous tone. "What on earth has the fellow been up to? What can he have done to have raised the deuce in you in so remarkable a manner? Out with it! Don't be ashamed. I wont tell."

"Don't make fun of me, uncle! *Please* don't!" falteringly implored Joan, who was enjoying a foretaste of the pleasures in store for her, and who felt mightily inclined to hide her face.

"Did he try to kiss you, Joan?" and the quietly sly chuckle with which Mr. Essington asked this showed that *he*, at least, thought the act by no means either an heinous or improbable one.

Joan felt she must go on now and fight it out as best she might. No more weak, half-formed thoughts of flight, so as to put off the evil hour of explanation, such as had been besetting her during the last few minutes! No; she must stay, and tell her uncle how badly his favourite had behaved, and endeavour to stir up as much wrath as possible against him. The horrid, dreadful, daring man! Oh, how was it *possible* that she could go on living so near to where he did, and meet him so often, both out of doors and in the house? What *was* she to do? and what would become of her? As I have said, she had determined to bury the terrible episode of her yesterday's walk in the depths of her own silence, if Baldwin had remained quiet, and not come, as he had declared he would, to her uncle about her; for it is so inexpressibly disagreeable for near neighbours in the country—and those, too, on such intimate terms as the Essingtons were with the Draycotts—to quarrel, that, for all sakes, she

magnanimously resolved to speak of the circumstances to no one, should he act upon her express desire of saying no more about the proposition he had thought fit to make. Yes; she had made up her mind to be very haughty and distant to him, as long as she was there; and perhaps she would be able to cause him to repent him of his misdeeds, and make him very, very sorry he had irreparably offended her. But these half-formed plans had been disconcerted by the interview the culprit had had the boldness to seek with Mr. Essington; and although an ardent member of the Peace Association in a general way, Miss Thornherst felt the time was come when she must gird on her armour and buckle to in earnest. She was conscious, however, that unless she could win over her present opponent to her side, she would have to contend with the overwhelming force of numbers—of one against two—more probably three—if her aunt should chance to throw over her championship of Mr. Aynard and espouse Draycott's cause.

She wouldn't allow herself any time for hesitation, but, "with head down and eyes shut," she rushed blindly to the attack, as though one of the peacefulest of English country drawing-rooms had been suddenly metamorphosed into an arena, her uncle a gaily-attired matador, and she herself the centre of attraction as the bull.

"Mr. Draycott met me out walking in the Park, yesterday afternoon, and first asked me to marry him—to marry *him!*" with angry warmth, "and I told him I would do no such thing; and he said he'd kill me if I didn't. And then he caught hold

of me by my arms, and wouldn't let me go away when I wanted to; and then he—he *hugged* and kissed me, uncle! several times! and he *wouldn't* let me go! and then he hugged and kissed me again, the horrid fellow!"

And having made this startling announcement, Miss Thornherst was fain to conceal her face in her handkerchief, whence sounds began immediately to issue sounding suspiciously like mingled laughter and weeping. The fact was, that being very much excited, she was nearer to having a good fit of hysterics than she had ever been in her life before, although she fought hard to control herself. Her efforts were hardly any use, however, for while tears of self-pity rolled down her cheek, a series of irrepressible little laughs mingled with her emotion, and she was really trembling from head to foot.

Mr. Essington looked at her with twinkling eyes, for a moment seeming almost stupefied; but the next instant gave way to a burst of laughter, so loud and boisterous that it seemed to shake the very room and make all the glass pendents to the chandeliers and candlesticks rattle again. His niece thought him particularly hard-hearted and unfeeling for so doing, and cried and laughed the more, meanwhile being heartily ashamed of herself. Grievous to say, the merriment of Mr. Essington appeared to be rather on the increase after that first shout of his. He couldn't stop! It was to him a thing as impossible at that moment as if someone had insisted upon his changing himself instantly into a crab! Every time he endeavoured to compose himself, the very sight [illegible] stiffly

upright and indignant niece (whose fastidious reserve and a certain stand-offishness of manner towards Mr. Draycott particularly, had often been the subject of amused comments between him and his wife, and of open joke with her herself), threw him off again into renewed roars, as he pictured to himself her astonishment and anger at her demure propriety having been rendered so limp by the unceremonious courtship of his favourite Baldwin.

He ceased—he exploded afresh. Then he gulped, and was taken with a fit of coughing, which compelled him for his own sake to be quiet; and which Joan looked on as a well-merited judgment for his cruelty in amusing himself at her expense!

"Well, Joan, and may I ask what answer you gave to these—very affectionate proceedings?" he asked at length, endeavouring to calm himself into speaking condition, and nearly breaking out again at the end of his sentence.

"Why, uncle, how *can* you ask me? What reply could I have made except to say 'No' most unhesitatingly? Any one who could have had the unparalleled audacity to dare to behave so *before* marriage—to *me*, too, of all the world!" and here Joan's look was a thing to be seen; "to *me*, who never, never gave him any encouragement, what could one expect *after?*" and her indignation was so great, as she recalled certain incidents which attended the interview in question, that she felt much better, especially now the first plunge was over.

"What! do you mean to assert you had the bravery to tell him you wouldn't have anything to

say to him? I am glad it happened to be you, not I," and Mr. Essington gave a malicious grin: "I should have been afraid of the fate of Matilda of Flanders. Really there was no answering for anything such a very brusque wooer might say or do! I say, are you sure he didn't box your ears?"

"Uncle! how can you?" and Joan jumped off her chair in a fury. "How *could* you ask me such a question?"

"Well, I only wanted to know. You are really both so eccentric that I shouldn't have been surprised at anything."

"You are very unkind, Uncle Frank," said Joan, again subsiding with a sense of injustice. "He ought to be beaten—or burnt alive—or something. Many a man has been called out and shot for much less," she added, sulkily, finding that her portion of consolation from her uncle would consist of nothing but chaff.

"What for? for proposing to you first, and then *hugging and kissing* you, as you poetically put it? What utter nonsense! as if he or any other man would ever have done it if you had not given him sufficient encouragement."

This was the last straw. Joan gave her uncle one unutterably appealing look and fell into the nearest chair, speechless, having dropped that only shade of concealment she had been possessed of—her handkerchief. She did not miss it immediately; it had fallen behind a footstool, and was lost to her view.

"Encouragement—yes: I repeat the word! I repeat my assertion," said Mr. Essington, un-

daunted by the look and unaffected by the collapsing action that accompanied it. "No one would ever have thought of kissing *you*, above all others, as you emphatically observe, if you had not given them marked encouragement."

"Never, never," began Joan, beginning to protest with vehemence, and then hesitating for a second, remembering certain thoughts as to his wished-for subjugation she had indulged in of late. "No; never did I behave to him in such a manner as could justify any person in his senses, even were he a prince, in conducting himself in such an utterly unheard-of——" and the lack of a suitable word brought her to an abrupt stop, and looking vexed and confused, with the traces of tears on her cheeks, she missed her handkerchief and arose from her seat to find it.

"Well, Joan, to make matters short, after all this, I must say that I think the very least Draycott *could* do was to propose," returned her uncle, with another effort to subdue hilarity that was on the point of bursting out again more fiercely than ever.

"Yes, he *did* propose, and, as I told you, uncle, I most positively and decidedly refused him; and he said he should come and see you, but I didn't believe even he could be as bad as that after what I said to him, or I should have spoken to you about it, and told you what to tell him."

"I tell him? Not I! I wouldn't venture to refuse him for you. I should look forward to being half murdered! No; you must tell him yourself. It is your own business; you've brought it on your-

self, and now must get out of it the best way you can. I must confess to a prejudice about dying quietly in my bed."

"I can't, uncle! I wont! He has grossly insulted me by his conduct yesterday, and has aggravated his offence by his persistence to-day. I shall never willingly set eyes upon him again unless he offers an apology."

"Bosh, girl! What are you talking of? Wish a man to apologize for wanting to marry you! That is the last new idea out."

"No, uncle—but to apologize for his manner of so doing. I suppose there is not a soul in England who would believe me if I said I was not vastly flattered by his Sultanship's condescension," added Joan, indignantly and *sotto voce*.

"Well, here is your aunt, at all events," said her uncle, as Mrs. Essington at that moment entered the room, and to her both turned, as to a tower of strength; Joan for defence against, and Mr. Essington in favour of, that arch-offender, Baldwin Draycott.

She had been told of the second offer before her husband sought Joan; and, her own mind full of the other candidate and his far more important claims, listened very coolly to the remarks made to her, as she sat leaning forward in her great armchair, her face wearing its most magisterial look, and certain signs about eyes and mouth that her niece knew well were meant as danger signals.

"Baldwin need not vex himself that affairs have not turned out as he wished," she remarked, when Mr. Essington and Joan ceased. "He may easily find a wife that would suit him much better, and

there are thousands of girls with really good fortunes who would ask no better than to marry the descendant of one of the oldest untitled families in England, as well as a remarkably clever and handsome young man."

Thus Mrs. Essington, in a resolute tone, and Joan looked down at her work, which she had taken up again, and spoke not, judging it best to save her breath, as she might require it all too soon to cool the porridge that must shortly be presented to her reluctant lips.

"But as to the letter I received yesterday, that is a different affair altogether, Frank," turning to Mr. Essington; "I promised Joan I would give her until to-day to think over a proposal she has been fortunate enough to have made to her, before saying anything to you concerning it. But now you must know all; and I trust a little present perplexity will produce future good results, and in the long and very happy life that is before her, Joan will never have reason to regret she has ever seen Radford." And Mrs. Essington handed her husband Mr. Aynard's letter. Joan's heart fluttered, and she cast an appealing look at her aunt, who replied by one of open encouragement and congratulation.

Mr. Essington read it, and gave a low whistle as he returned it to his wife.

"So! you were right Ellen, and I was wrong," he said then, slowly and gravely. "Then this is the mote that has been in your eye, and prevented your seeing Draycott as plainly as he should be seen?" he added, turning to his niece, who, not liking to work, was nervously unwinding and wind-

ing up again a skein of light-coloured wool. "Well, you will not be the first girl who has refused a poor man to marry a rich one; and, if it is to be so, I cannot say nay to it, though I should have thought Baldwin the most suitable, as far as age goes, and so on. But Aynard is an excellent fellow — thoroughly good-hearted and true, and honourable to the backbone. Come here, you hussy! and let me wish you joy; since you have selected to be an old man's darling rather than a young man's snarling—not that Aynard is an old man by any means, either, except for a chit like you." And Mr. Essington rubbed his hands in one another, in a manner half regretful, half congratulatory. He had not parted an hour as yet from his favourite, Draycott, and was feeling his heart rather sore for him; as (although, by his manner he had been led to expect there would be some little difficulty), he had appeared so eagerly certain of ultimate success, that his friend's conscience smote him when he thought of the disappointment in store for him.

"Auntie and Uncle Frank—don't be angry with me, but I don't mean to marry either of them," said a low voice; "I should not be a good wife to any man, and do not wish to marry at all."

There was a moment of blank astonishment when she had finished her say. The Essingtons looked at each other and then at her again; and while her uncle remained silent, with a very serious expression on his face, her aunt began to speak remonstratingly.

"Joan—this is carrying a joke too far. You cannot really wish us to understand that you mean

to refuse Mr. Aynard? It is impossible! It cannot be done; and after all the encouragement you have given him, leading us and everyone around you to suppose that your mind was fully made up to accept him! Think again of the offer. You will not have two such in your lifetime; and then, after Sir Thomas' death, there will be the title as well."

"I should like *that* better than anything," said Joan; "but I am serious, auntie—really. I am much honoured by both the gentlemen who have made such proposals, but——"

And then there was a good deal said which it would be only going over old ground to repeat; and Joan was weeping a little—not much though, for she was not given to crying in a general way—while the Essingtons were seriously offended, plainly showing themselves to be so, too. But Joan was firm to her text. She could not make up her mind to "buckle to," and would prefer to go to Otago. Would her aunt let her go up to London in a day or so and see about the governess situation? And if she could only get that, she would go away and never see them again—she didn't want to be a trouble to anyone, but she *couldn't* marry Mr. Aynard, though he was far beyond her deserts—in every way—and very nice and good and kind. She *couldn't* do it—that was the end of it."

"Then it is to be Baldwin after all, Joan?" said Mr. Essington, his brow clearing a little.

"No, uncle—it is to be no one. I shall never marry anyone."

"And what am I to say to Mr. Aynard?" inquired Mrs. Essington, in a sort of despair.

CHAPTER III.

STRANGERS AT RADFORD.

THERE had been a scene, finally, between the recusant Joan and her relatives, both of whom thought they did well to be exasperated with her folly. Mr. Essington declared violently and repeatedly, that if she had been a child of his he would have boxed her ears and given her bread and water for a month. To which she had responded, that she would submit to have her ears boxed as much as he liked if he would only believe her when she said how sorry she was, and promise to try to forgive her; and she had sobbed so violently and professed herself so penitent, that, enraging as humility is sometimes, it went a good way towards disarming him in his heart, although outwardly he was not much appeased. Mrs. Essington wrote her letter, not telling her niece what she had put in it, but showing it to her husband before it went. And that evening passed uncomfortably away, and in the course of the next morning a telegram came for Mrs. Essington from Mr. Aynard.

"What is it, auntie?" Joan had whispered.

"He will be here for a final answer this afternoon. In Heaven's name, Joan, think it over again! For your own good, I ask you most earnestly to make yourself happy, and in doing so

we shall all be made so too. Think, child, you have so few friends! Don't quarrel with those who have loved you so well. Indeed, I don't see what is to be done if you do not reconsider what you have said—I really do not."

Joan knew that her aunt alluded to her remaining in the house, for Mr. Essington had plainly declared to his wife, as soon as anything could be arranged for her, out she should go. He was thoroughly angry with her when behind her back; though when she was present, and looked at him with beseeching eyes, he could not but soften a little to her. Meanwhile, rudely disturbed from her happy, careless life, she looked to her armour, and buckling it on her, carefully, if reluctantly, prepared to go forth to fight for herself in the great battle of life. She had been strengthened, not enervated by her stay at Caprera.

Her aunt wished her to remain for a few days, at least until Mr. Aynard had been; and having made arrangements, and written to her correspondent in London that she would be certain to see her within a few days and would write again, appointing the hour, Joan waited with mingled patience and sorrow until the moment came when she should go.

She had been so happy at Radford! so happy! The aunt and uncle had been so kind—how had she had the heart to wound them so, through their dearest friends? Well! they would forgive her after she had gone; and perhaps she should die soon, like Stephen had, and her life would be finished, which would be a comfort. These thoughts kept Joan company upstairs in her own room, for she

had retreated to that fortress, not daring to venture out of doors for fear of meeting Mr. Draycott, and dreading also a little to present herself before her offended relatives. Towards the end of the afternoon, she heard a carriage stop before the gate; and, carefully reconnoitring, saw Mr. Aynard descend and walk up to the house. Listening, she heard her aunt's voice, and felt immensely relieved when they went into the drawing-room.

Mrs. Essington was caught then! And it would be almost impossible that the subject should not be alluded to by her and her visitor, even if only a few words were interchanged between them; and then her aunt's face would give him *some* idea, at all events, of what her answer would be. And perhaps —oh joy too great to happen!—he would be content to let the matter stop there, and she might not be called down to see him at all!

But even as she thought these thoughts, she heard the drawing-room door open and shut again, and—listening with her soul in her ears—her aunt's footsteps coming upstairs and approaching her room.

"If I ever so much as look at a man after this," said Joan to herself, in great trepidation, as well as the beating of her heart would allow her to collect her ideas, having been seized with a veritable panic, "I hope and pray he'll ask me to marry me on the spot! I do! Nothing would be too bad to punish me for my surpassing folly in having made myself agreeable to Mr. Aynard. What on earth shall I do? I'd give something for to-day to be to-morrow, and then I could look back and see what I had

done. Perhaps after all I shall say yes. Oh, I wish I could! There's auntie—she is furious. I shall be turned out of the house to-morrow." And conscience-stricken and sorely-beset Joan (entirely by her own doing) looked up, rather towards than at Mrs. Essington, who was standing in the doorway. The latter opened her lips and then closed them tightly again and looked away from her niece, as if she had barely succeeded in stopping some remark that her reason told her would be better left unsaid. Thoroughly ruffled and angry looked Mrs. Essington, yet with a strong control put on herself.

"Joan—go down to the drawing-room," she said, after a moment's silence; and the tones of her voice showed that displeasure and an earnest desire, even hope, that all might still be well, struggled to obtain the mastery over each other. "I can scarcely command myself to speak to you quietly; but, for the last time, and for your own sake, consider what you are about to say."

"Have you said anything to him, auntie?" ventured Joan, timidly. Had Mrs. Essington been only angry, she would have been roused, too, at the idea of anyone thinking to browbeat her into doing what she had declared it to be her conviction would be wrong to do; but the signs of disinterested grief and anxiety for what she held would be best for her niece were too plainly visible to be mistaken, and subdued the object of them more than any terrorism would have been ever able to do.

"I hardly know what I said; but it is not too late, even yet. Act as your reason dictates and as

your best friends would have you, and all will be as it should be. If otherwise—but I cannot trust myself to speak of such an alternative.

Mrs. Essington hereupon hurried away, and her niece heard her shut herself up in her own room.

Mechanically doing anything to gain time, Joan turned to the glass and gave a touch or two to her hair. Looking at herself, she saw she was quite white, even to her lips. "Thank Heaven! I'm looking as ugly as a washed-out rag;" she said to herself; "and when he sees me, he wont mind what I say, so long as he is rid of me;" and comforting, or trying to comfort herself with this reflection, she gave one last look of rueful despair round her room, as if she expected to derive mental or physical support from the chairs or carpet, and slowly descended the stairs.

At the door she paused, not involuntarily, but because she literally *could not* open it at once. She stood there quaking, with the handle of the door in her grasp, until a slight movement of some one within thrust the awful sense of her actual position clearly upon her. "It is of no use—in I must go," was her desperate self-adjuration; and shutting her eyes tightly as she nerved herself to turn the brass knob she held, the door opened and she entered.

Very slowly and quietly she came in. One quick glance, and one only, she ventured to cast towards Mr. Aynard, and then with downcast looks she approached him where he stood by the open bow-window, past which the afternoon sun shone, with a warm, mellow, golden light on the bright autumn flowers in the garden without, and only just glancing

on the curtains of white lace and heavy green damask within. The air was suave, clear, and warm, with a whiff of the odour of pine trees and half-dead leaves in it—a fragrance peculiarly autumnal. Very still and very pure looked the piece of blue sky above the surrounding shrubs; very shadowy the room, and grave the sole occupant.

Joan's troubled mind was not so full of herself but that she observed all these things—in a side-long, absent way, it seemed to her—and their influence was not lost. Insensibly the thought of herself began to lose itself in care for him—remorse for the part she had acted merging itself in a newborn terror lest he should be really very sorry. She had no fear of being scolded or shaken, as she had been the day before; or that similar arguments would be urged upon her to bring her to reason. Her instinct told her that what she would probably have to encounter would be something very different—something so calm and yet affectionate, so full of good reason and quiet, unselfish assurance that it would be to the full as much *her* good as his own wish that he sought—that she felt very uncertain indeed as to what she should say—only being sure of one thing, in her own mind, that if she said "yes," then she should say "no" afterwards.

Mr. Aynard, although, as has been said, not a decidedly handsome man, was yet a very noble and dignified-looking one; and never had she seen him looking better, Joan thought, than on this day, although it was easily to be seen that he was both hurt and disconcerted at the rejection he was prepared for. There was a calm composure, too, a

patient determination in his demeanour, as well as a resolution to have a full explanation, that thoroughly daunted her. He was not a person to do things by half, she felt. He had not made this proposition to her without due deliberation, and what even the least conceited man in the world might justly consider a very fair amount of personal encouragement from the lady herself. Besides, everything, except the facts that he was a widower and no longer young, was to be urged on his side, while her expectations were absolutely *nil*. Joan mentally assured herself that if she were only miles away on her road to the distant New Zealand she would be one of the happiest girls in the world, in comparison to what she felt in her present position.

Mr. Aynard advanced to meet her, and put out his hand. She could not avoid giving hers in return; and emboldened by his friendly, yet not too *empressé* clasp, she nerved herself to raise her eyes to those other grave ones she knew were looking down on her. The expression of mute reproach that she encountered in them, sent hers away again to take refuge among the legs of the chairs—on the carpet—the twisted claws of the old-fashioned mahogany table—the glittering fire-irons and fender—anywhere, in short: and still he went on holding her hand in his, with a loose, gentle clasp, as if, though not willing to let it go, he did not desire to make her feel that it was only a lover, and not some one who wished to be her friend also, who detained it in his own.

She could not stand it any longer, however, and after a few seconds, slowly attempted to draw her

fingers away—gently—not as if she were angry or embarrassed. The movement seemed to rouse him from his abstraction, and seeing she did not speak, though her lip was trembling, as if she had made the endeavour and failed, he broke the uneasy silence.

"Well, Joan—and have you nothing to say to me?" in a grave, kind voice, at the same time releasing her hand.

"Yes—no—I mean yes, if you please," she stammered. "I am very sorry—very sorry indeed, Mr. Aynard, if anything in my manners should have given you to understand that—that——" and she ignominiously broke down in dire confusion, while a crimson blush suffused her cheeks and spread itself over her very forehead and throat.

"Well? take time, my dear. Go on;" in the same gentle, fatherly way; and relieved by the ice having been broken, she went on, almost piteously.

"I am so sorry. I did not think you were serious in talking to me—I thought you were only laughing at me; so please forgive me for anything I may have looked or said, for I can't—I can't marry you, Mr. Aynard."

This was plunging *in medias res* with a vengeance! There was a complete silence when her voice stopped, and to her further discomfiture, Joan heard her heart beating very loudly against her side, and hoped that the ticking of the pretty gilt clock on the chimney-piece would make noise enough to cover it.

"And why not? What reasons have you for

drawing back, *now*, Joan? I may ask as much as that, surely, after——"

"I have no reason—that is, nothing worthy to be called a reason. It is only that—that I do not like you sufficiently—that I am not in love with you—pray—pray forgive me, Mr. Aynard!" pleaded Joan, in great distress, and hardly able to keep her tears from falling.

It was really so very solemn and serious all this, and he was so grave and kind, although so hurt about it, that her heart sorely pricked her with remorse for any foolish bit of coquetry she had been guilty of; and she thoroughly repented her of any idle amusement she had had in indulging her thoughts of the moment without having ever gravely considered the end to which they tended.

"Well, my dear, I did not expect—I did not think you were. But I argued that if you did not care for anyone else—if there were no previous attachment (and your aunt has told me that there was none that she knew of), that you might come to like me in time, when we saw more of each other, well enough to give yourself to me as my dear wife—well enough to listen to your friend's advice (for I am confident of their good wishes), and that, as you have no assured future to look forward to, but rather one involving the most painful uncertainty (forgive my reminding you of what must necessarily be very distressing), you would think sufficiently highly of me to intrust your happiness in my hands. And indeed, indeed, dear Joan," gently taking her hand again, as she stood before

him perplexed and downcast, "I would endeavour to make you happy. Trust me. You are very dear to me now, though I know and have seen so little of you; how much more, then, shall I love you if you can consent to look upon me in the light of your future husband? The engagement should be as long or as short as you wish. I would not hurry you for the world, although I should be naturally anxious for the marriage to take place as soon as it was possible——"

"Oh, this is dreadful!" perfectly gasped Joan to herself. "Oh, what on earth shall I do? He talks as if it were all settled—as if I had accepted him. And oh, dear! hadn't I better, and have done with it? Ay, there's the rub; it would only be the beginning of it. It does seem like wilfully throwing away every chance of good luck I shall ever have! —and to refuse him for an idea!"

"Think of it, my dear. Your wishes shall be gratified as they have never been before, and can scarcely ever hope to be by your own unaided exertions. I am prepared also, should you desire it, to make such arrangements in your favour as would enable you to materially benefit your father and sisters. You will be very happy, I think; and if any love or precaution on my part can prevent it, no care or sorrow shall ever come near you again. Your life, I have been told, nay, you yourself have given me to understand, has hitherto been far from a happy one; young as you are, you have known and endured many more misfortunes than often fall to the lot of one who is gently born. Will you not let me try to make you forget them all?"

Joan made no response. The offer was so tempting a one: was she mad or a fool to refuse to see the advantages thus placed before her? Not the least of the troubles that were attacking her was the accusing voice of her common-sense, reproaching her for even dallying with so God-sent a chance of fortune, and not closing with it at once. Mr. Aynard could not be blind to the outward signs on her face of the struggle that was going on within her, and after a moment's pause, went on—

"You know enough of life to be certain that sentiment cannot wholly, or even greatly, make up for that negative kind of happiness which consists in experiencing none of the material ills of existence; and you are not fitted to bear them——"

"I have always been used to them. I should not feel them like most other young women would, Mr. Aynard," asserted Joan.

"No, my dear. I know you have a brave, honest way of looking at things that takes from them half their terror; but, believe me, strong, bold as you are, you are neither strong enough nor bold enough for what you undertake. Even looking at it under the most favourable light, sickness might come—want would follow——"

"I know it—I know it," and Joan's tears ran over her full eyes, and rolled down her cheeks. "Far better than you can ever imagine, I feel the truth of what you say; and yet——" and her throat throbbed with a half-stifled sound between a sob and a sigh.

—"But yet you cannot quite resolve on accept-

ing an offer which must for ever place you above all possible reach of such calamities?"

"No; I can't! Oh, Mr. Aynard, help me—strengthen me, for your own sake! Do not try to persuade me. I am *afraid* to marry you—I dare not."

"Dare not? why?"

"Because I do not love you in such a way as would render love for anyone else a simple impossibility. It is very true that I have never cared for anyone—in that way before, but my life has been so peculiar a one, so secluded from all temptation of the kind, that under different circumstances I could not answer for myself. If—if I did what you would have me, and afterwards saw some one I liked more than you, I should be very miserable; more miserable than being poor and shabby and hungry could ever make me. And you—so kind and generous—you would regret that you had ever married me—be sorry that you had ever even seen me, when I should tell you I liked someone better than you——" and Joan's voice gave way in downright weeping, and she covered her face with her hands.

Mr. Aynard had listened closely and watched her intently while she spoke; and a cloud that had gathered there, cleared away from his face, while a look of noble confidence and love brightened in his eyes.

"And is this the real—the only reason you do not wish to become my wife?" he asked, softly.

"Yes," sobbed Joan, trying to control herself; but she had been greatly excited during the past few days, and did not at once succeed.

She by this time was fully alive to the importance of the interview; and the temptation was so great, her reason, too, was so vehemently in favour of it, that it was with a kind of blind despair she kept holding to her previous resolve. But her grasp was numbed; she was far more conscious of the greatness of what she turned away from, than assured of the validity of the reason she had alleged—which had before appeared to her to be so good. And, oh! what *must* Mr. Aynard think of her for having said such things? though it was in sheer desperation that she had said the words which had called forth the last question. It was because she hoped they would be sufficient to put an end to his suit for ever; but her whole face—her ears—her very fingers had tingled while she spoke, with shame at her own boldness.

"Then, Joan—hear me. I have no fear. A heart so true to its own instincts—a nature as honest and brave as yours—that impelling those words, gave you the assurance to utter them, demands and shall ever have, my fullest confidence—my unwavering trust. Had you shown the same implicit certainty of yourself after your previous confession of indifference to me, I might have hesitated—might not have felt the same certainty of doing well in repeating my offer. But now I know that I can trust you as myself—my name, my honour would be as safe in your hands as in mine. My darling—my true, honest love! I cannot despair of winning you, even yet."

"Oh, Mr. Aynard—but indeed, indeed you—must! I have chosen my lot in life, and will abide by it. I can and will work, but I cannot, will not

marry for money. I don't blame most girls who in my position would act differently—those especially not only well-born, but gently reared; to such as those, the life I have before me would be intolerable —unbearable. But I am used to privation; uncertainty and humiliations have always hitherto fallen to my share; and, having borne them, I can bear with them still. I have never expected anything better; and it would be doubly wrong in me to do any one the injury of marrying him simply to avoid a burden which I am stronger than most women to carry; and by so doing, moreover, fill up a place that might otherwise be occupied by a more disinterested person."

"Hardly by a more honestly-spoken one, at all events," said Mr. Aynard, as she paused; and looking steadfastly at her as she went on—very softly but very steadily, for her emotion had passed away and left her the calmer for its outburst—he listened, but made no more attempts to argue or persuade. She instinctively felt by the tone of his last words that he had given her up, at last, and was simply looking on her as something that, once wished for, had passed completely beyond his reach; and yet he would see the last of it before he turned his eyes away, and found the fair picture no longer by his side. Conscious, too, that he gave only an abstracted attention to the words she spoke, she yet said them, to give him time to consider how best to take his leave of her.

"And I should not have been happy. You thought I was only a good-natured, ordinary kind of English girl; one who would love her home, and be content

with the routine of duties and amusements evolving from it. If I were what I have described—and nothing more—I should not act as I am doing. But I am not. Poverty has not refined my character for good: it has both hardened, and, I fear, soured it a little. I am very slow at taking an impress, but once taken, it is for life; so, however repellant my past has been, I am accustomed to it, and much that it has taught me will never leave me. I have a wild Arab-like feeling of independence and opinions of my own, both as to affection and the ordinary restraints of the world which would be so necessary—indeed, indispensable—to a woman in the position of wife to anyone of birth and standing like yours. I care too much for myself—too little for the world, ever to be a very respectable denizen of it. It has shown it can manage very well without me; and, without actually throwing down the gauntlet of defiance to it, I am still by no means averse to showing I can do just the same without *it*. I have lived to and for myself only for so long, that unless I passionately loved with my whole heart and mind the man I married, I should consider I inflicted upon him a bitter wrong; for I am no young unformed girl to be 'trained' or 'moulded.' Such as I am now, I fancy I shall continue to the end—unless I change very much for the worse: self-sufficient and self-reliant also, you would not understand me, and I should not need you. In a very little time I should grow tired of a way of living which my previous habits had not rendered necessary, but only amusing to me; and should displease you by my carelessness of forms, and shock you by

eccentricities—which, though harmless in themselves, would be looked upon as monstrous because not generally practised. Forget and forgive me, Mr. Aynard; and if I have displeased you now, think that I have done so to save you from far greater pain hereafter. Once more, forgive me, and—and——"

"I understand you. But you must let me tell you that while I cannot say I think you have done wisely, you have earned my respect by your plain dealing. If ever it should chance that my services might be of use to you in any way, you will promise me to avail yourself of them?" She hesitated. "Nay, Joan, I consider I have a right to ask this. As simply, as frankly as you have spoken to-day, I shall expect you to act for the future."

"If you can help me, I will ask you to do so, if I cannot manage without assistance; and thank you very much, Mr. Aynard, for your kindness," said Joan, her eyes filling again.

He had gone, and it was all over for ever. Joan would never be a rich woman, and in all probability would never marry at all. She had stuck to her colours to the last, though sorely wounded; and, running upstairs, locked herself up and cried till she was nearly blind.

It was all over! and Mrs. Essington's heart was a heavy as well as an angry one when she thought of her niece's future. "I don't know what on earth will become of her," she said in her grieving to her husband that evening. "I shall write to her father to-morrow to see if anything can be done. But she is over age, and he has no control over her."

"I don't care what becomes of her," Mr. Essington rejoined, in an angry tone. "Let her do what she likes, and go where she likes. It does not matter to us—now. I thought we should have had her near us always."

"Who would have thought it?" sighed his wife. "But she and I have arranged matters so far, Frank, that she is going up to London to-morrow to that Mrs. Evans, a niece of her old nurse's, who was so good to her. She lets lodgings somewhere in Camden Town, and Joan will be quite safe with her. And then she will see about this situation in Otago; and if she doesn't get a sickening of the life she has chosen long before she starts, never trust me."

"But we can never have her here again?"

"Yes we can. The Aynards wont stay here all the winter, though they talked of doing so. Mr. Aynard will not, at any rate. He is sure to marry again soon, now, too, and what has happened will all be forgotten."

"And Baldwin?"

"Well, affairs at the Hall cannot last long as they stand at present. The slightest agitation will finish our poor old friend; and Baldwin told me once lately, that directly anything happened to his father, he should let the place and go abroad again."

"Well, you know best. Manage as you like," said her husband, who knew by experience that his wife was an excellent politician.

"And I have still hopes of Baldwin and Joan," she added, smiling a little, after a slight pause.

"By Jove, Ellen! you don't say so?"

His wife nodded and went into the drawing-room. There sat Joan writing to her sisters, and also to Mrs. Evans, telling her she might expect her the next day, and asking her to meet her at the station, in London.

Joan was bending over her writing, and had put her left hand up to shade her eyes—ostensibly—but really to hide the tears that kept filling them; for she was thoroughly *abattue* by the events of the day, and the displeasure so unequivocally manifested by her aunt and uncle, although it was evident that the former, at least, put a restraint upon herself.

Mrs. Essington discovered how she was moved, and came and looked over her shoulder, putting her hand on it in a softened manner, which Joan quickly divining, in her humbled mood, felt truly grateful for; and impulsively turning her head, pressed her lips fondly, and with an expression of mute pardon-asking, upon the firm, white fingers.

"Don't cry, Joan; I can't bear to see you, though I am so angry with you," she said, softly.

"No, you're not really angry, only very much vexed, auntie," returned Miss Thornherst; "but some day you'll say that I have done right, after all."

"There is only one case possible in which I can say that," said her aunt, "and you know what I mean."

Joan looked down, and shook her head slightly.

Mrs. Essington meant if she should ever marry the other suitor.

"But, try as I will, I *cannot* understand you.

The only explanation or excuse that I can even imagine for your conduct is, that you must like someone else," said her aunt, looking keenly at her, with a puzzled expression.

"I don't! How could I look you in the face and deny it, after all your kindness to me, if I did?" said Joan, indignantly, lifting up her eyes, with the remains of tears sparkling all round her eyelashes and glittering in the candle-light, while one of those accusing blushes that confound alike the innocent with the guilty, of course hastened to present itself where it wasn't wanted. "There isn't a man living that I'd give as much as a snap of my fingers for! or, if there be, I've never seen him."

Mrs. Essington had by this time seen too much of Joan to know that her increased colour "meant anything;" so, only showing by a sharp twinkle of repressed amusement that she marked it and considered it a suspicious circumstance, continued—

"Notwithstanding, Joan, I must believe that you intend to have Baldwin, after all?"

"Never—never!" exclaimed Miss Thornherst, encrimsoned and furious, speaking with all the old impetuosity of her childhood; "rather Mr. Aynard a thousand, thousand times; even if he were poor and the other rich!"

"Hush, Joan! don't speak so loudly! you may be overheard," said Mrs. Essington, apprehensively, and glancing at the windows, outside of which, on the walk before the house, paced her husband, soothing his mind with his favourite cigar.

Joan recollected herself, and became more subdued, while she repeated the old story—

"You see, auntie, I don't care to marry at all. I've thought of what you said to me one day, you remember, about it, and although there are many advantages to be gained yet I can't make up my mind to it. I have no inclination whatever to have the bothers of the head of a household laid on my shoulders—to say nothing of possible children, and a great worrying torment of a husband. I'd rather be a governess or servant, because then, at all events, if I didn't like my situation I could give notice to quit; and I should have all the world against me if I gave notice to quit when I was married. I thoroughly appreciate my freedom, I assure you, auntie."

"It is an incomprehensible thing to me that, at twenty-four years old, you haven't yet cut your wisdom-teeth! You talk about knowing the world, Joan, but unless I am much mistaken, you'll find yourself very awkwardly situated one of these days, if you don't take care." And her aunt looked extremely provoked. "I declare I could find it in my heart to give you a good shaking, if I thought it would do you any good," she added.

"Please don't! I had enough of that kind of thing the day before yesterday," said Joan, with mock dismay.

"No, you hadn't *enough*, or you'd behave yourself better," retorted her aunt, severely. "I don't wonder he was angry."

"And I am sure I don't wonder that *I* was too. You don't think of me, auntie, at all! If you only knew——"

"And when it might all have been so different!"

lamented Mrs. Essington, fairly giving tongue to her inward regrets; for, seeing that every hope was gone, she thought she could indulge herself by a little mourning. "And I suppose you'll go over there, and slave away for a dozen years or so; and then come back with your health ruined, and not a penny in your pocket, and all your good looks gone! I tell you, Joan, your conduct of these two days past will be a lasting remorse to you."

"Well, for good or evil, it is done," said Joan, rather despondent over the cheerful picture thus conjured up by her aunt; "and every one would have thought much worse of me if I had said, 'yes' to-day, and then drawn back afterwards."

Joan packed up such of her possessions as she intended to take with her that night; and thoroughly miserable, although not repentent—"for I'd do just the same if I had it to do over again," she told herself—she went to bed, and cried herself to sleep. She had offended her kind uncle and aunt! that was the burden of her griefs.

But her dreams were curiously of Baldwin that night—nothing but Baldwin Draycott. He followed her up and down, meeting her in unexpected places, always having his face turned towards her, and seeming in deepest grief. Several times she awoke, thinking she heard his voice calling loudly to her; and once it seemed to her that he was drowning, and that no one but she was nigh. It appeared to her that she was in a lonely wood, standing beside a deep pool of yellowish, muddy water, fringed with tall, dry rushes; on the side nearest to her there were none, however—only the steep, red-clay banks; and

there, upon the heaving, swelling waters—for it seemed as though a strong wind agitated them—tossed to and fro the body of a drowning man, fighting, battling for his life. It seemed to her, too, as if her tongue were tied, although she endeavoured in vain to call for the help she could not run to seek; for a strong fascination rooted her to the spot. His face—the drowning man's face!—she could not see it. Turn as the body would, the face was always concealed. At last a mighty rush of water threw him, struggling no longer, but helplessly resigned, at her very feet, so near that she could touch him by bending down (for the ground sank abruptly just before her, and the pool was very deep in the place by which she stood), when the body turning over, she saw the face at last—Baldwin Draycott. His eyes were partially closed; but, as she gazed in terror at him, they suddenly opened and fixed themselves upon her, with a look so agonizing, so full of horror and frenzied entreaty, that forgetting everything but her impulse to help, she bent towards him and seized him, just as he was being borne out of her way for ever. His hand closed on hers convulsively, and with a start—she awoke.

But the impression was still strong when she arose in the morning. A strange feeling had taken entire possession of her. She could not get him out of her head; a sense of his presence was so strongly with her that often she turned, expecting fully to see him close beside her. She was uneasy and troubled. "What if her dream should prove an omen?" she thought. "Of course he wouldn't shoot

her now she wasn't going to marry any one; but suppose he shot *himself?* There would be a state of things!"

When she saw her aunt, who, though she was looking very grave, yet did not seem cross, she ventured to ask her if her uncle had said anything as to how Mr. Draycott took his answer; and was somewhat reassured by being told he evidently expected it to be a refusal, and had made no remark whatever beyond thanking Mr. Essington for taking his part in it.

After breakfast (as she was to go by an early train, and her trunks being forwarded to the Lymestone station under Tom's care, in a conveyance from the village inn), the pony-chaise was brought to the door, and Joan and Mrs. Essington set out for the town. When she went to say good-bye to Mr. Essington in his study, all Joan's fortitude gave way, and she cried so violently that he was fain to say a kind good morning to her, instead of refusing to kiss or even shake hands with her, as he had intended to do. She was to come back and spend a week at Radford before she set out on her voyage; so it was not the last look she was to have at the garden—every flower of which she knew, and had attended to—and, on passing through it, she burst out crying afresh, so that Mrs. Essington had some ado to prevent herself declaring she should not go at all. But she restrained herself; and, getting into the chaise, they drove off.

Down the familiar road; past the church; and then along by the black-tarred palings of the park,

under the shade of the big chestnuts, whose dry red leaves fluttered sorrowfully down on them as they passed, until they came in sight of the north lodge.

"There he is!" exclaimed Mrs. Essington suddenly, and Joan gave a convulsive jump of alarm. Yes, there he was sure enough! leaning against the gate with his hands in his pockets, and looking much as usual—in spite of that absurd dream of hers. "I cannot pass him—he evidently means to speak," added her aunt hastily, as she slackened the reins; and the pony, who knew Mr. Draycott well, stopped at once.

He came up to the chaise on Mrs. Essington's side. Joan turned her head the other way, and stiffening her back, looked in a Lady Macbeth style (as well as her features would allow) across the fields at the opposite side of the road. But as much as could be seen of her face was crimson. Her tumult of feelings was so great that a loud singing in her ears prevented her catching what was said between her aunt and Baldwin; but her sight was less impaired, and she observed a hired carriage driving quickly along the road, and coming almost to a stop as it drew near. Unconsciously her attention was strongly attracted to the occupants thereof—a woman in black, who scarcely looked like a lady, although she was well dressed, and a tall man with reddish whiskers, who was looking eagerly out on the side near the park. The carriage evidently intended to enter the grounds by the disused avenue, but Mr. Draycott motioned to the driver to go on to the other lodge.

Joan had involuntarily turned her head towards him while watching the carriage, and then, to her surprise, saw that he was standing gazing after the receding vehicle with eyes that almost started from his head, while his face was lividly pale, even beneath the brown tan that covered it. After one motionless second—during which Mrs. Essington, struck by his appearance, had been mute with surprise—without a word or look he suddenly turned from them and darted back into the shrubbery, across which there was a short cut leading to the Hall. Up this they saw him hasten at the top of his speed.

"There's an odd way to go off in!" exclaimed Mrs. Essington. "I hope those strangers bring no bad news. What can it be? He looked so white and startled."

"It is very strange," echoed Joan, in wondering surprise.

"I don't want to part from you in anger, Joan, although it is only to be for a few weeks, and you have really behaved in a way to provoke a saint," remarked Mrs. Essington, severely, as, after she had watched Mr. Draycott's figure disappear from sight among the trees, she prepared to drive on; "but I cannot help saying that I consider your behaviour has been as heartless as incomprehensible. I should have thought that any girl, especially one who has mixed so little as you have in men's society, would have fallen like wheat under the sickle before such a one as Baldwin Draycott."

And the lady seemed thoroughly put out.

"It is not one bit of good talking, auntie," rejoined her niece, stubbornly. "I suppose I must really be heartless, as you say; for I don't believe I have it in me to fall in love with any one. I am as I was made: some girls are susceptible and others are not, that's all."

Mrs. Essington looked provoked, but made no other observation, and the drive to Lymestone was made in a silence very unusual between two such naturally talkative persons.

They were only just in time to catch the up-train; and Joan had to take her ticket in the hurry and bustle of a small crowd, and then hurried on to the platform to find her aunt.

The latter had been seeing that her luggage was duly labelled, and now there was nothing to be done but to say the parting words and Joan to take her seat in the train.

"Good-bye, auntie dear—you have been very, *very* kind to me. How can I best say that I thank you with all my heart for your goodness to me, and beg your pardon most sincerely for the trouble and annoyance I have caused you?"

And Joan, speaking thus, took her aunt's hands in her own, and looked up, really penitent and grateful, into her face.

Mrs. Essington relaxed a little, and said a few words in a manner she evidently tried to make gracious, about her sorrow that there should exist any necessity for their parting at all; and that she must be sure to write on her arrival, and say exactly how she found herself placed, and what

prospects she had about obtaining the Otago situation. The guard, however, just then came past, and locked Joan as securely up in her pen as though he feared she would commit suicide by bursting open the door of the compartment during the journey, and he was resolved to do what he could to prevent such a catastrophe. And Mrs. Essington stood back, a few feet distant, on the platform, waiting until the train should move off.

Suddenly she approached the door of Joan's carriage, and looking wistfully and regretfully up at the round, resolute young face that peered down at her over the window-sill, spoke impulsively and eagerly—

"Come back, Joan! Don't go at all, you foolish child! Come back with me now, and I'll engage to make all straight. You will change your mind some day, and be sorry for this wild freak when too late!"

"I can't, auntie—don't ask me," said Joan, surprised and affected by the anxiety and feeling in Mrs. Essington's face. "I must leave you some day, you know, and I'd better go now. *Dear* auntie! say you'll forgive me quite—do, auntie!—you have been so good to me."

Here the guard suddenly reappeared, unlocked the door, and (the train beginning to move) nearly *threw* a lady into the carriage; and in the slight bustle consequent upon the derangement of attire and faculties of her hasty entrance, no more words could be spoken. Then Joan was rattled off

out of her aunt's sight, into the far distance, thus taking some of the first steps necessary for the future she had preferred to that which her relatives would have chosen for her—and I, for one, think she seems a very rash and foolish young person for thus quarrelling not only with her bread and butter in the present, but with a vista of the same for an indefinite time in the future. What is your opinion, reader?

CHAPTER IV.

THE LODGER GOES.

ANNE was fortunate in her efforts to secure the strangers—at least, one of them, as an occupant of the upstairs drawing-room and the best bedroom; but it was only to be for a week or ten days. Other apartments had been engaged before those of the Armours had been seen, and the latter were only required as a sort of makeshift until the former could be vacated and prepared for their new tenant. Mrs. Alcott—for it was the Australian widow who had come to Kentish Town and chanced upon the apartments let by the Armours—had wished to take rooms in the house of an old friend of hers, who, some years before, had returned from Sydney, and settled in London; and this would have also been very welcome to Mrs. Carter, but that the apartments in question were then occupied by another tenant, to whom she was obliged to give a week's notice to quit, before she was able to receive Mrs. Alcott as tenant. In the meantime, then, temporary accommodation had to be found, and as Mrs. Carter was the only person that the gentle little widow was even distantly acquainted with in London, she chose to take lodgings in her immediate vicinity rather than, as her son urged her to, in a more fashionable part of the town. As Mrs. Carter's youngest baby

was ailing, she could not offer to accompany them in their search; but directed them to apply to a house-agent's at the corner of the street: which they did, and by him were directed to the Armours.

This Mrs. Alcott explained to Anne, who, though disappointed of her hopes being realized as to any permanent good to be obtained from the strangers, yet was glad to think a few shillings could be made at all events; for in their actual circumstances, the smallest amount of money was to be eagerly desired, and from the first she took to the little widow, who had such soft eyes, and such a gentle way of speaking; and assured her nothing should be wanting to render her as comfortable as it was possible.

"I want nothing fine—only homely and comfortable," she said; "I want to feel myself at home and be able to rest after our long voyage; and I can't do that, somehow, at the big West-end hotel where my son took me to first. There is so much hurry and scurry, that, though you are really away from it in private rooms, yet you can't help feeling it in the air, even if you hear nothing of it."

Anne assured her she would be very quiet indeed there, and care should be taken nothing should disturb her in any way. Meanwhile George Alcott leaned with his back against the marble chimney-piece, and stared covertly at Anne, who, all eager and anxious, stood before the widow's arm-chair, answering her questions about housekeeping and charges generally. "But wont you sit down?" Mrs. Alcott asked, a little nervously. Somehow, Anne, despite her poor clothes, was so indisputably

a lady, that the widow could not feel comfortable at her standing while she sat.

"Thank you; I am obliged, for I sprained my foot not long ago, and it is still a little painful," said Anne, gratefully, while her eyes filled with tears she hoped would not be observed, as the twilight was falling. Her heart must have been a very foolish or a very tender one, I think, just then, to have been so touched by this trifling kindness.

"There will be good attendance?" asked Mrs. Alcott.

"Yes; I can answer for that," said Anne readily, quickly determining to wait herself. She should not mind it at all, she thought; anything for a change.

"Well then, I think I will take the rooms. I should like to come to-morrow."

"Everything shall be ready for you, madam," said Anne.

"And my son will come and see me every day, and I shall spend a good deal of my time at Mrs. Carter's," went on the widow, contentedly. "I don't think I shall be at all lonely, as you thought I would be," she added, as she rose and put her arm fondly through that of George Alcott's, and lifted her light blue eyes with all a mother's pride and fondness in them, to his sunburnt face.

He started from his lounging attitude, and looked as if roused out of a dream. "I'm sure you'll do very well, mother, and this young lady will do all she can for you," he said. And soon afterwards they went away, leaving Anne in a great state of self-gratulation at having done a little business.

When the others returned, they were pleased as well, when they heard what had occurred; only that Julia declared Anne ought to have just doubled the charges, as the lodger was to come for so short a time. "However, as you've engaged with them, you'll do the waiting, I suppose," she said, "for, of course, we are not going to hire a servant just for a week."

"Of course I am, and the cooking too."

A fortnight has passed. Mrs. Alcott had come and gone away again. She was at her friend's, a little way off, and Anne saw her frequently; sometimes meeting her in the street, and once she called to take her some little trifle she had left behind her at the Armours.

The little widow had been very nice while she was with them, and Anne's desolate heart turned to and clung to her almost with affection; for her Julian was gone, and Ida had turned from her, and she had nothing and no one in the world to care for, excepting her father, who did not care much for her, and whom she rarely saw. Her stepmother had possessed Ida with the idea that so resolute a heathen, and so hardened a sinner, as Anne, was far better avoided, as there was little good, and much bad to be learned from her.

Mrs. Armour and Ida had come back from their stay at the sea-side a few days before Mrs. Alcott left the house; and the kindly little widow, having heard a good deal of the invalid from Anne, was very good to, and took a great deal of notice of the sick girl, bringing her many little delicacies, and finally asking her to come and see her sometimes,

when she went away to her friend's, Mrs. Carter. Ida "took" to Mrs. Alcott amazingly, and the two were great friends. Stranger though she was, the reserved child would speak to her of her own thoughts and religious perplexities in a way she never had been known to do to any of her own family, even to Anne.

The widow's religion was of quite a different calibre to that of the Armours; and in her the poor bewildered girl found some sort of anchorage for her tossed and sorely-tried mind. What she had been taught of religion, and what she had been taught by life, had differed so much from each other that she was puzzled to know which to believe, the evidences of her own senses or the precepts of the Bible, interpreted as they had been to her. The cloud that covers oftenest the minds of the best and purest among us, in the hour of their greatest trouble, had descended on her; and, knowing that the doctor did not expect her ever to recover, though she might linger on for some months more (for Mrs. Armour, to Anne's unutterable pain and indignation, at what she considered to be the ill-judged infliction of an awful shock upon a creature already so weakened and unnerved by illness), she had sunk into a state of what is called religious melancholy, in which she could see no hope, admit of no consolation. She had received her sentence of death very quietly, as was her wont; but Anne, accidentally going into the room where she was, after her stepmother had left it in tears (having done what she considered was her duty in telling her), and unknowing what had occurred, addressed

a remark to her upon some indifferent subject, was transfixed at the look and face turned on her. Such hopeless woe is not often written so legibly on the countenance of any human being, nor often, I most fervently trust, in their hearts, either.

"What made you say anything about what the doctor said to her?" Anne asked with angry pain, afterwards of her stepmother.

"Anne, I considered it *right* she should know the state she is in; it was clearly my most distressing duty to tell her," Mrs. Armour had responded with dignity.

"Why, the doctor may be a fool, as I think he is, and she may recover after all, and then what good will it have done her? It is a nice way to raise her spirits, isn't it? A cheerful kind of thing to tell a sick girl!" Anne had continued, passionately.

And henceforth every thought in Ida's mind turned to the procuring of means to prolong her life, even if it could not be saved. Her standard of what things were worth in this world now rated all only by the standard of whether they would do her any good or no. She said little on the subject, but Anne knew intuitively what she pondered over. Meanwhile, Julia and her stepmother wept frequently, and showed their sympathy in an unmistakably clear manner to the object of it.

"'We all do fade as a leaf,'" quoted Mrs. Armour, shaking her head sadly, one day; and really, this time her sadness was genuine, for, despite her little aggravating ways of turning everything that occurred into a moralizing medium,

she was thoroughly shocked and startled at what the doctor had told her about Ida. She looked upon her whole nature, in fact, as prostrated by grief; but deeming it her duty to put a strong restraint upon herself, she derived actual comfort from the thought that so melancholy an occasion ought not, and as far as she was concerned, certainly *should* not go unimproved upon.

Ida happened not to be in the room; but Anne was, and in no fit state to bear these little remarks with her usual cynicism or indifference. Shaken in health as she was, for almost the first time in her life herself, the physical depression and nervous irritation that weakens brought with it, had so influenced her nerves that, at times, all power of self-control was momentarily lost; and she made remarks she bitterly repented of afterwards. Not that the remarks in themselves were otherwise than she would have quietly repeated in her calmer moments; but it was the fact of her making them to her stepmother or Julia, and thus day by day arousing bickerings and sparrings as puerile as they were unfitting, at a moment when a new and terrible enemy was coming to attack one of their number.

"'We all do fade as a leaf,'" said Mrs. Armour.

"If I had the power of Queen Catherine of Russia," said Anne, speaking out in fierce passion (for she had become thoroughly sickened by appropriate observations of the kind), "no one should ever dare to allude, even in the vaguest way, to death in my presence, except under pain of suffering it instantly."

"Ah! but you *haven't*, you see," chuckles the

fair Julia, pleasantly, her risibility being evidently uncontrollably aroused by something either in Anne's voice or speech.

"Anything to equal your insolence and impiety, Anne, I have never yet encountered," said Mrs. Armour. "It only shows the very strong apprehensions you entertain as to the punishment to be endured after it, that makes you so wish to avoid all mention of its very name."

"Pardon me for not agreeing with you, mamma," returned Anne, determinedly, "but if I suffered your observation to pass unnegatived, you might consider yourself justified in asserting it for the future as a fact. It is *not* what comes after death that I fear, having long lost all belief whatever in that interpretation of our creed which says that every one who does not strictly conform to some particular code of laws, as to our behaviour, words, nay, very thoughts, shall be irredeemably damned."

"Anne!" shrieked both ladies, in surprise and indignation.

"But what I most certainly dislike is the eternally bringing upon the *tapis* of a most disagreeable and repellent subject," pursues Anne, evilly intent upon having her say out, shrieked they never so loudly. "It is as melancholy as it is as true a fact that some day or other we shall be as forcibly obliged to quit the world, without our inclinations for a moment being studied in the matter, as we have been involuntarily sent into it. Both facts are disastrous to us. Still, we need not add to our sufferings by anticipating them. Almost every one, at one time or another of their lives, will have a

tooth extracted, or a severe illness, or some other affliction, which they will be compelled to suffer personally, no proxy being allowed in such cases; but he is indeed a fool who poisons the healthy part of his existence by perpetually ruminating over the indisputable fact that one day he will be ill."

"This is almost too horrible to be credited," breathed her stepmother, not yet recovered from the shock of a word which is only used in the Athanasian Creed, and by persons who swear, having been uttered in her presence. "Come away, Julia! leave your sister to herself. Silence and reflection *may* possibly bring her to her senses."

And gathering up their work, the ladies fled, while Anne laughed a laugh that really sounded as if she were actually enjoying the sensation she had thus created; but the natural end for such over-straining of her nerves as she had gone through for some weeks past, having begun in passion, terminated in an hysterical fit of sobbing and trembling, with a violence that almost frightened her, as she had never had an attack of the kind before. So she went to her bedroom, still shaking so in every limb that she could hardly walk; and managing to pour some water out into the basin (although she spilt more than half on the ground in her half-blinded efforts), she bathed her head and face, until she felt quieter.

The shrinking from, nay, her *loathing* for her stepmother and sister Julia was becoming intense. To be in the very room with them irritated her almost more than she co[illegible]. Their very movements annoyed he[illegible]ted expres-

sions of their faces were absolutely hateful to her. It seemed to her, as if from some cause or another, almost everything they said or did was spoken or done in direct reference to her; sometimes, as with the arch *espièglerie* which was always in play on the most unsuitable occasions (it appeared to her), *in joke,* as they said, when they chanced to be brought to book concerning their words and actions, and at others to *rebuke* and *improve* her. She was in no humour for their jests—indeed, *that* fact to the jesters constituted the richest elements of their pleasantries—and would none of their reproofs, and had not the faintest, most distant desire to be improved, at all events by any efforts of those she so thoroughly disliked. The strange antipathy that existed between her and her elder female relations seemed to ordain that whenever Anne was sad *they* must necessarily be gay, to show their contempt for her judgment in being cast down at such insufficient causes; if she were earnest, they were instantly (whatever their mood had chanced to be the moment before) unusually frivolous and giddy; if she were out of humour, they must at once exhibit an extraordinary patience and good temper. If she advocated buying anything, she was teased with extravagance; if she counselled restraint or alteration in some way which she considered would be a save, they retorted with a charming promptness that she needn't trouble her head concerning what she knew nothing about. Twenty times a week Anne would have snatched up her bonnet and jacket and rushed from the house into the street, into *anywhere* so that she could have been free

from the indescribably revolting presence of those detestably cheerful and *insultingly* religious women. For their religion held that every one who did not agree with their caprices of the moment were necessarily as devoid of piety as they were full of it; and in agreeing to what they set forth as what they believed to be the truth, they must submit themselves to whatever taxes such exceedingly good people chose to impose on those around them.

Anne's face grew gradually to wear a hunted sort of expression in these days. Her beauty seemed to wither away—she forgot her fair face—the face that she hoped would one day bring her fortune, nor was ever reminded of it except when in passing rough groups of men, standing smoking, with their hands in their pockets, leaning against the walls of public-houses, she would have her ears wounded by their coarse jests and remarks concerning it. The heavy sorrow that was on the house, although every now and then there were bright days on which Ida both felt and looked nearly as well as ever she did, put gall and bitterness into every little trifle that had formerly been a pleasure to her. If she glanced at herself in the glass, she caught herself wondering how she should look in mourning; and then, sick at heart at the thought, turned away, hating herself that the idea had presented itself.

One afternoon, Ida had gone to take tea with Mrs. Alcott, and the elder ladies and Mr. Armour were out. Anne had been out also, and was come back very tired, and went to the kitchen to have her dinner. She sat down beside the dying fire,

low crouched on the unswept, red-bricked hearth. She was lazy, spiritless, feeling herself degraded by the evidences of poverty that surrounded her; her ragged dress that she was too idle to mend; her house-boots that hardly held together; the two or three unwashed plates left from the scanty meal called dinner, that lay in untidy disorder on the table, where bits of potatoes and a few small burnt-up bones, showed that the bill of fare for that day had consisted of some chops from the neck of mutton and *pommes de terre au naturel.* "And a very good dinner, too! quite good enough for any one," the innocent reader may remark, with a degree of gentle asperity quite befitting any one in possession of easy means, and who, in reading these lines, happens to feel singularly complacent about their digestive organs. I suppose, however, no one can deny the fact that there are chops and chops—potatoes and potatoes? And not only were these far from being the best of their kind, but they had been very badly cooked. In a word, Anne had had her temper soured for the afternoon, because there was but a scanty dinner for her, and a very nasty one to her ideas. And she felt so very tired too, having walked a long way that morning to try to sell some paintings she had just finished, and meeting with no success had been obliged to bring them back again unsold. So in a desponding, unhappy mood, instead of setting to work to wash up the dishes and tidy the kitchen, as she ought to have done, she had sat herself down to ruminate upon her miseries—about as unwise a thing as she could well have done.

Only that Cinderella was as good as she was beautiful, which Anne was most certainly *not*, one might have taken her as a very fair representative of that much put-upon damsel, as she sat huddled up together for warmth (for the afternoon was a cold one), with drooping eyelids and dejected mouth. The kitchen window had for look-out only a high, red brick wall, at the distance of a few feet from the glass, on the summit of which, their furry bodies standing out in relief against the muggy grey sky, prowled two large, well-fed cats, with an amount of easy self-assurance and calm contempt of anything, excepting the spouts of water-jugs, to which London cats are alone equal. The prospect out of doors was cheerless, while that within was worse. There was Anne, leaning her heavy head on her hand, while she gazes into the fender, noting discontentedly the crumbs that have been lying there since the day before, and certain fuzzy lumps of coagulated dust lurking here and there in the corners. With her disengaged hand she almost mechanically picked up a half-consumed cinder, and commenced crumbling it between her fingers, feeling so miserable and wobegone that it was a species of pleasure to her to do something that would make her still worse; to feel there was a lower depth still, to which it was possible to descend.

Poor Anne! She is very weak, reader, is she not? Do you pity or despise her most? Her head is aching dully, and a craving, sinking sensation in her chest, asks for food that is not to be had for two or three hours yet—not till the ghost of the

social meal known as "tea" shall be prepared at six o'clock. She is foot-sore also, for the cheap boots which alone she can attain to, have kindly grown quite a crop of nails during her long walk. She is discouraged thoroughly; she had set out with tolerable hopes of success, and had come back without any; and, moreover, the person who kept the shop had spoken very roughly and impertinently to her, and it chanced to be one of her very first experiences of this kind, for generally people were civil enough in their refusals. She had unconsciously buoyed herself up with the idea, though she did not put it into words, that because the distance was so great, and the day was such a disagreeable one, and her feet hurt her so, that her paintings *must* sell. Oh, what a baby! what a baby! Why, even Ida could have told her better than that! But Anne was decidedly backward for her age—the backward one of the family. Then she had discovered this interesting and cheering fact on the occasion of her failure, and had preached a bitter little sermon to herself as she trudged back home, over the very ground she had come so hopefully an hour or so before; and ended by being in a genuine bad temper when she got home, and found that dinner having been long over, her "chop" had been put in the oven to keep warm, and had all dried up. The reader must please remember that the unfittingly Epicurean tastes of Anne had often been severely commented upon by her more correctly-minded stepmother and Julia; and their accusation was as true as was the fact that the misguided young woman openly gloried in it.

However, temper had to be stifled; for, from certain well-known indications, when they returned both the ladies were fully primed for a domestic row, spiritualized and intensified as usual by differences on moral sentiments, with religious exhortations forcibly dragged, where, in one of the parties' opinions, they had no right to be.

By-and-by returned Ida, who was brought home by the kind little widow and her big son. Julia admitted them, and Anne was not going to show herself at all, when a sudden call from Ida summoned her to the drawing-room. Upstairs she hurried to slip on another dress and wash her hands, besides smoothing her hair, before she dare let herself be seen. She was looking so pale and ill when she opened the door that George Alcott, who happened to be nearest to her, turned very red in the face, being struck with sudden sympathy; and in his haste to place a chair for her, nearly tripped himself up over the legs of the table.

Before she left the Armours Mrs. Alcott had had her suspicions about Anne's intentions respecting her son, and had been inclined to be indignant—as most mothers would have been at what she looked upon as forward boldness in the daughter of people who let lodgings daring to lift her eyes to her George—who was so soon to be made a gentleman of, too! But when she looked up sharply into the absent, grave eyes, and marked the beautiful, pure face of the girl whose manners were so subdued and soft, who never once looked towards her son, except when speaking in answer to a question asked by him, she began to doubt her own sagacity. He

was seated at the other side of the room, talking to Julia, who was exercising all her pretty little fascinations on him at a great rate. But though he chatted with her, his eyes were scarcely ever away from the face of her sister, who sat beside his mother on the sofa. There was a strong attraction for him in her still, calm face, with its deep eyes, so quiet and pathetic. She was growing much older lately, was Anne; and she sat and listened to the widow, who was speaking to her very seriously about Ida (who had gone upstairs to lie down, as she was tired), as if she was quite unconscious of the presence of the second man in the world whom she had discovered admired her. She was feeling that Mrs. Alcott's hints and advice as to her sister's health was worth more to her than all the men in the world, and she looked very much what she felt.

Presently they rose to go; and only then, Anne noticed that Julia's manner was ultra-gracious to Mr. Alcott; and hurriedly resolved on thwarting her. As she gave him her hand at parting, she contrived to give him also such a look—so pleading —so pathetic, that George's heart beat rather faster than usual for several days after when he recalled it. He could not help fancying that she was asking him in a dumb, unconscious sort of way, to help her out of some great trouble that had fallen on her; and though he honestly tried, he could not get her out of his head for many hours together—excepting when engaged with his lawyer on the business that had brought him to England.

During the time his mother had been at the Armours, he had called to see her every day regularly, at one time or another of it; and became more and more attracted by Anne's great beauty every time he saw her. Julia's doll-like prettiness had certainly caught his eye at first, as well; but there was that about the other sister that made him regard her soon as the one woman the world contained, as far as he was concerned. Other girls were as pretty—some even prettier, he considered, for he was a man who admired dress and a fashionable appearance above mere beauty, generally speaking; but Anne was the one he thought he could love with all his heart, the more so as a certain amount of respect and even awe mingled with his admiration for her. For the first time in his life, George Alcott, the rough-and-ready grazier and cattle owner of the Australian Bush, where he had passed the greater part of his life, felt humble in his own estimation, and was almost as shy as a girl, in the calm presence of the beautiful Anne.

From the first she had remarked (what girl would not have?) his open admiration of her; and although she had given a passing smile to her involuntary conquest, she had given no more thought to it, until Julia openly taxed her with "making eyes" at him. Then she roused up; and looking about her on the real state of things (which considering that Anne was still engaged to Julian, was not an unnatural one), viz., that the fair Julia rather meant to claim the victim as her own, she maliciously made up her mind to thwart her if it were possible. So, as you have seen, she did not scruple to give

him as much encouragement, in a very quiet way, as would serve to keep his fire burning. His mother had told her he was come to England on "law business which might bring him in a great deal of money;" and after all, it might not be a bad speculation, she thought. For she was quite prepared, in thought at least, as we know, to give up Julian.

CHAPTER V.

ANNE AND IDA AT MARGATE.

SOON after this visit of the Alcotts, Anne and Ida went down to Margate by themselves. Having very little money (as you may guess), they went to the Ludgate Hill station and set off in one of the excursion-trains advertised by the London, Chatham, and Dover line. The tattered old box—containing such of their poor habiliments they took with them—was thrust, after a little difficulty, under the seat; for, unused to travelling, they were afraid to let it out of their sight; and congratulating themselves that the fellow-passengers they were to be cooped up with during the next few hours were a respectable-looking, quiet set of people, the elder sister made the younger as comfortable as she could, by means of an old cloak spread under and behind her as a cushion, with a newspaper to be held up as a shield from the draught coming from both windows of the compartment, and indeed, of every window which was open in the carriage. Certainly, travelling in third-class carriages in summer weather, with an invalid for whom you fear the smallest current of air, *has* its inconveniences. It is much more agreeable and safe, too, to take a first-class ticket, and by feeing the guard secure a compartment to yourself; but then this needs money. If

these people you are reading about had waited to travel *en prince*, it is very certain they would have remained in Kentish Town.

On they went, stopping at nearly every station, after the fashion of trip trains, and poor Ida's weak head was very weary with a throbbing pain long before they reached the end of their journey. The high spirits of their fellow-excursionists were oppressive and saddening to her; her melancholy looks had not much in common with the sharp-eyed, talkative Londoners, in their smart holiday clothes, and thoroughly bent on enjoying themselves. Anne once or twice caught herself looking wonderingly and reproachfully at the noisiest of them, not liking to ask them to be more quiet—indeed, how could she inconvenience eighteen or twenty people, just because *her* sister happened to be sick? However the journey finished at last, and thankful was she, when amid the deafening uproar and bustle and rushing about and pushing of an excited crowd of pleasure-seekers, they found themselves landed on the breezy, open platform at Margate. A little bewildered, Anne drew Ida to one of the long wooden seats; and dragging the tin-box towards them, they sat down, and waited as patiently as they could until the various heaps of luggage and groups of eager mothers and children and girls with their sweethearts, dispersed; some in the heavily-laden omnibus, and others in cabs, while those who could secure neither, or were more economical, trooped off with their parcels down the hot, sunny incline leading to the marine-parade, where the fresh sea-breezes blew and rushed up and down as if delighted

to whisk hats off and whirl flounces about. Then came the business of looking for lodgings—of humblest kind—for their purse had so little in it, and they wanted to stay there as long as they could make it last. Some were found that luckily combined cheapness and cleanliness, and were not so very far from the sea; and they sat down to their first meal with a fresh pure air coming in at the little square diamond-paned window; and Ida, lying on a big chintz sofa, smiled in her languid, serious way, and declared her head much better already. And Anne, thankful from her very heart, dared even to indulge herself in more peaceful day-dreams than usual, when presently, Ida being restless, they went out and sat down on the sands, in the quietest spot they could find; with the great, ever-moving, grey sea stretched out before them, and the music coming faintly in gusts from the distant pier, whose lamps twinkled cheerfully across the dark bay and between the masts of the ships lying in the harbour.

They liked their landlady, who, being new to her trade, was neither as uncivil nor as exorbitant as such people generally are; and they liked their little shady room in a rough, whitewashed cottage, where a bright-leaved vine climbed up the walls and round the window; and if it had not been for the fact that the swarms of children with which the row abounded were noisy and troublesome beyond their years, and that clothes seemed always hanging out to dry before the house, while a faint smell as of suds pervaded the quarter most mornings in the week, they would have had small cause to grumble. Mrs. Claggart was good-natured and kind-hearted

despite an eye to business which Providence had kindly invested her with, and got to take a real interest in and pity two poor young creatures; and when she had time (for she had other lodgers besides them) would come in of an evening and sit down and chat with them, with plenty of curiosity and plenty of kindliness too. She couldn't make them out, she told her husband, a fine-looking, sunburnt fisherman, as he would sit smoking his short pipe in the kitchen after supper. "They speak so well and have such nice ways, and yet is as poor—as *poor!* there—you should just see the few rags of things they've got in their box—heaven help 'em! The youngest is just going as fast as she can go."

"What is it? consumption?" he asked, as he lazily stretched one blue cloth leg out on the hearth and turned over the coppers jinglingly in his trousers-pockets.

"No—decline—a sort o' wasting away. You should hear her poor breath if she's at all hurried or excited; and the other don't seem to have much strength in her, though she's a fine-growed young woman enough to look at."

"I hope they've the money for the rent—you must look arter that, Sue. Decline or no decline, we can't afford to lose by 'em, you know."

"Oh, that's sure enough. I've got the first week in advance. It's the custom, don't you see?" with a shrewd twinkle in her eyes; "but lor! they seem as innocent as babes. It's a mercy they've got into good hands, for they'd have been cheated orful at a'most any other house. They don't seem in very good spirits, neither; but no wonder for that,

pore things! No mother, I hear; only a stepma; and we all knows what *them* is."

Ida liked Mrs. Claggart to come in and talk to her. Anything for a change or distraction—anything to divert her poor mind from brooding over its griefs and bodily aches and pains. For the same reason she liked the gaiety and noise of the Parade; the negroes with sooty faces (and ordinary-coloured English hands) and heads of elaborately-frizzed black wool, and whose eyes and lips were both of so appalling a character that it was hard to say which was the worst, whose attire wavered between the diabolic and mildly transatlantic, and whose shrill voices seemed never tired of recalling the "song of chanticleer" in choruses of great power and fervour. She liked the shops where Derbyshire spar was manufactured into all kinds of ornaments, both personal and household, and where shelly pincushions, mugs, sheets of paper with views of Margate on the tops, wooden spades, woolly animals, fruits, American cooling drinks, cheap books with yellow coverings, photographs, and about a thousand other articles were all arranged in the most attractive manner. The Esplanade; where there were many patient goats and resigned donkeys, surrendered themselves into the hands of the Inscrutable Fate that, by no fault of their own, destined them to become the prey of rampant sea-side children; and pony-chaises, too, drawn by animals in the last stages of equine misery. The harbour, where burly boatmen in blue jerseys clamoured loudly anent their crafts, and shrimp-men, oyster-men, and fruit-men recommended their

several wares to the passers-by with deafening outcries. The jetty and pier were abhorred of Annie's inmost heart; and the swarming, noisy, machine-plagued sands were scarcely more soothing to her fretted mind that yearned for utter quiet and loneliness more than for anything.

In all these places Ida loved to be. Their very incongruity seemed to attract her more than anything besides; and amid the gay crowds of pleasure-seekers she would walk, serenely pleased, with her serious child's face, and her suffering, sad eyes, and think Anne was very disagreeable if she ever proposed to turn a quieter way, more out in the country, towards Westgate, or eastwards towards Kingsgate. For Anne preferred the new part of the town. There were fewer people and less noise; the air was purer and cooler; and there were fewer of "the amusements"—save the mark! so delighted in by those who visit the place solely for change and enjoyment. Solitude and utter quiet pleased and soothed her; and often she would have stopped her ears with cotton-wool before going out in the town with Ida, only she feared they would both get run over by the constant succession of vehicles of every description in the narrow, crowded High Street, if she did so. But, on the great wide sands, in the cool shadow of the line of even chalk cliffs, and walking amid the wet, fresh weed, and multiplicity of little round white stones and pearly shells, with the fresh cool breeze from the sea blowing in her face, and the sunlight shining on the snowy-sailed pleasure yachts, with their narrow red pennants

flying in the air; with the only noises to be heard, the voices of some fishermen in their boats near shore calling to each other; the twittering of swallows who had their nests in the rocks, and the wash of the water on the shores, she could forget all her troubles, and dare to imagine to herself how it would be if all the creases in her life were smoothed out, and her burdens made so light that she could bear them.

Although so handsome, Anne met with but few adventures in the place. Old clothes and a grave face and a sick sister are great protections. Shop-boys out for their holidays, and city clerks and commercial travellers wearing puggarees and smoking like furnaces, strolling arm-in-arm along the streets, staring into the faces of the passers-by with that meaningless, open-eyed, impudent expression peculiar to most of their class when "out for a lark," and elbowing and pushing their way to the jetty to look out for the pretty ga-irls, passed her by without the loud remarks and jocose nudges their gallantry taught them were the most refined ways of testifying their admiration and approval of the young women of their own rank. The young doctor, however, that she was obliged to call in for Ida (who one day frightened her greatly by awaking her from a sleep that, unknown to her, had been in reality a kind of stupor, and after wandering in her head for a few minutes, had had a very long and severe fainting-fit), looked at her hard and long, and was as curious as he well could be about them both; and very considerate and kind also he was; recommending simple remedies and easily-

got-at amusements, instead of the costly panaceas he would naturally have prescribed for patients with money in their pockets.

Certainly, people were often very good to these forlorn girls; and very sincere and thankful were their feelings towards them for their kindness. It was true their curiosity often distressed them—Anne, that is to say—Ida seemed past that—for the poor things had little to tell that was creditable, and much to hide that was the reverse. It was a great trouble, too, not to be able to say "what their father was;" every one looked a little strange when they were told "he didn't do anything." And Anne did not like to say "a gentleman," it seemed so ridiculous—such a blatant satire upon the position of his children.

In spite of every care, the few coins they had set out with melted very fast, and with all the haste they made to vanish brought very little to their whilom owners. And Ida wanted so much, and it was so hard to deny her, remonstrating that the money was wanted to pay the rent with, that Anne often felt almost desperate. "If I had any voice, I would get an old guitar from somewhere, and go out and sing to get money," she declared. And Ida, reserved, fastidious Ida, had been so changed by a terrible greed for *anything* that could prolong her young life—*anything* that could keep her a little longer among cheerful sounds and warmth and sunlight in the land of the living—would regret that the power was wanting in her to do it.

It seemed quite natural, and in the order of

things, that her beautiful sister should come out of her sheltered existence (which if it had had few joys, had had as yet no open, public, *personal* degradation), and take her place among the itinerant panderers to the amusements of the town; to sing on the Marine Parade, with hundreds of mocking eyes, or worse still, coarse ones looking on her fair face, seemed a very simple thing to do to the poor dying child, in whose young mind the things of this world were become as nothing, unless when they could be made to minister to her comfort.

Oh, the terrible longing for life, when one finds oneself face to face with death! It is so easy to contemplate dying when one is well and strong.

They had no money—they wanted some. There would be no *sin* in going into the streets to sing for it, therefore it would be well to do it, if the power had existed. And, I think, towards the end of their stay, Anne would have done it if she could. With a horrible shrinking, with a timidity so great that it was almost agony, she would have gone forth and gained far more than money; but the voice was wanting, and she could not go.

In these days she almost forgot Julian—Julian who was far away and well, doubtless—but her poor sister was with her always, suffering, perishing, for want of a little of that gold of which many have so much.

"If George Alcott had persevered," she told herself, "he could have walked over the course—there would have been absolutely no race at all. She would have promised to marry him, provided he would give her what money she wanted. For

Julian, it could not be helped; he must go. He was a man, and would forget her; and *she* was strong and hard. Her heart would not break, or if it did—if it did, what matter? She thought she could look death in the face better than Ida. She was feeling very weary of living; it was so hard to her. To die would at least be to be quiet and forget; and to do *that*, whenever she thought of her lost lover, was what she longed for most, next to money. For, lost to her he *must* be, if any chance offered a husband with means at his command to her while her sister lived." And her eyes would be dim with unshed, weary tears as she looked westward, and thought of *him*, her beautiful love—the only sunshine her life had ever had. If he but knew! if he but knew! if he could but help them! And involuntarily her hands would outstretch themselves towards the sea, and her heart give a great cry for the pity that could not come to her.

One evening, when they had been at the sea-side about a fortnight or three weeks—and oh, what a long, long time it had seemed to Anne! for when one is unhappy, the days appear as though they would *never* end—she set out for a walk by herself. Ida had been unreasonable and wretched, because her sister had been obliged to tell Mrs. Claggart that they would only be able to stay another week, she feared, and in an offended mood insisted upon staying in the house in place of going out for her usual stroll at that hour. So Anne, after borrowing a book for her, had gone out alone, with her face turned eastward (feeling at ease as to Ida, for the landlady had promised to have an

eye to her), meaning to have the one remaining pleasure she had, a long, solitary walk on the sands towards Kingsgate.

The shore was comparatively deserted at this hour, and besides, it was not a fine evening; the sky was grey and dull, the air heavy and depressing, the very sea silent and sad. So she was nearly alone on her way. The people who were there strolled slowly up and down, or sat still and read; the very children appeared subdued into something like quietness. It seemed as if a stagnation had descended on nature, animate and inanimate, and as though the great heat of the day had exhausted every one and everything. On she went along the dreary wastes of red sand, with the changeless white cliffs in their monotonous uniformity of heights on her right hand, and the sullen sea whispering on her left across the ridges of seaweed left by the receding tide; and after a little more than an hour's time she reached the spot she had fixed on in her own mind before setting out.

It was a large, flat stone at the foot of the rocks, round a corner that hid all traces of the town from her sight: from all she saw of human habitation, or aught of life excepting the ships on the sea, she was apparently as much alone as the first person who stepped on the shores of England. Rocks, sky, sand, sea, and weed, comprised all the objects within her view.

Wearied and out of breath, for she had hastened, she sat down on the stone, and leaning her elbow on her knee, and her chin on her hand, gazed off away over the waters. Unconsciously, however,

they soon faded from her sight, for her mind ceased to take notice of what the eyes looked on.

The old subject, their poverty and her own peculiar griefs! It was wearying, wearying. She had never realized more painfully her almost entire deficiency in hopefulness. She felt the necessity of trying to keep up poor Ida's spirits by cheering words and confident predictions. It was better to prophesy smooth things, she thought, than to say nothing; better to hope and be disappointed than not be able to hope at all. But the well-meant words would die away on her lips when she attempted to utter them; they felt to her like cruel, mocking lies—to speak of joy and ease and future happiness to one who could have them never more, on earth at all events. The commenced sentence would stop abruptly, and sick at heart she would turn away, asking herself how was it possible she could give that which she had not?

Well! it was no use thinking; that profitable way of spending her time would be of no use to her. And saying this inwardly, she lifted up her dispirited head and looked wearily around; for whilst musing she had covered her face.

The sea was ripplelessly calm, and in colour a brilliant dark green, with high lights of greyish blue. Afar in the distant horizon the dun-coloured smoke from the passing steamers stood still, forming thick, fantastic columns of different shapes. Towards the west, the mass of dense grey clouds had broken, leaving a little space clear, which showed a fair, bright, delicious azure, specked over with little dots of fleecy white. The rest of the sky was of a deep

purplish, slate grey, with shades and breaks here and there of lighter and darker hues. Ships, great and small, were passing and repassing; stately frigates, with tall well-set sails spread out to catch the faint breeze that would probably spring up after the sunset, for then it was breathlessly sultry; white-winged nautili of fishing-boats lying motionless on the water, and long, low steamers, whose distant decks seemed to touch the waters.

"There will be a great storm to-night," thought Anne, and she rose and went homewards. Then came a few cool drops of rain—falling very noiselessly and quietly, as fall despairing tears when all hope is over. No sooner come than gone, however; and then appeared a small strip of many-coloured rainbow athwart the grey dulness of the heavens. Mechanically Anne turned her head to seek for the other end in the dark, menacing distance eastwards; and suddenly, as it appeared to her, she observed the sails of a fishing-smack quite red—a fiery rose-red—and a great black ship that was passing by appeared bathed as if in flame.

Wondering, she looked again towards the west, and found the whole horizon ruddy with the dying splendour of the setting sun. The great round golden ball disappeared even as she gazed; its sudden burst of glory had been like the last gleam of hope—brighter still because of surrounding darkness, but it vanished—so soon. Still Anne observed and remembered afterwards, that as the brightness of hope's glow faded, the blackness of the despair and menacing horror, which contrasted so with it, waned also. With the *hope* gone, the *terror* died;

and a solemn grey succeeded, covering the graves of both emotions. The darkness of the threatened tempest vanished with the fading of the last gleam of ruddy sunshine; and one pallid, vivid streak of faint yellow alone remained to mark the east from the west, the whole of the rest of the heavens being of a soft grey, vivified with a murky rose-tint.

And Anne walked home, pondering on what she had seen, and wishing that Julian could have been with her. How little would have made them happy! she told herself, having somewhat changed during the past sad weeks from the opinions she had entertained during the bright May weather. Homewards she went through the falling twilight, among the laughing, chattering crowds, and through the gaily-lighted streets, and then down the Marine Parade.

There were people still there; some strolling about, and others sitting on the green iron seats, or leaning against the railings, although the red gas-lights that twinkled in the numerous open windows (through which she could see the servants preparing the supper tables), and the strains of the band playing "God Save the Queen" on the pier, showed that the hour was a late one. A cool breeze had sprung up; and when near her journey's end, Anne paused, reluctant to go in, and resting her arms on the railings, stood and looked out over the darkening sea. That end of the Parade was almost solitary, and she could thus stop unobserved. The salt smell came flying in her tired face, and she found it was very pleasant so to linger by herself.

If Julian were but with her! if there were but any stated time at which she could look forward to seeing his dear face again! Though only two months gone by, it seemed to her as if years had passed since then! And thinking thus, she turned to go home, and found herself confronted with George Alcott and Ida.

He stood within a few feet of her, her sister leaning on his arm; and astonished as Anne was to see them, she was most struck by the singular change in the appearance of the latter; for although they were near a street lamp, there shone a radiance on her face and in her eyes that came from no outward light. A sort of halo of happiness had transformed the languid, spiritless child, into a bright-faced, angelic being; the spiritual expression of her delicate features, only intensified, not dissipated, by her look of high serene contentment. Her companion seemed much as usual, only a little more shy, perhaps. He was dressed in a light suit, and looked well in it, and appeared very kind and tender to the sick girl with him. All this Anne took in at the glance she cast on them before she spoke, in bewildered surprise.

"Mr. Alcott? Is it possible?"

"I was sure it was you, Anne," said Ida.

"And I was not sure; you looked so pale and ill," he observed; and then they shook hands.

"Do I?" she asked, smiling faintly. Her second thought had been, after she recovered from her surprise, "I wished for Julian, and Heaven has sent *this* man."

"Yes, perhaps it is the gaslight; but I was shocked when I saw your side-face against the dark-

ness. You are very much changed. I hope you have not been ill?" he spoke very quietly and softly.

Mrs. Alcott's son had inherited much of the tenderness of his mother's heart; and the great rough fellow could be as gentle as a woman when his feelings were touched.

"Oh no. I have had some anxiety, but have not been ill;" and she looked at her sister. "We had better walk on, it is getting late for Ida to be out," she added. "Nothing has happened since I was away, has it?" For she was anxious to know what had caused the difference in her appearance. The unexpected coming of Mr. Alcott alone could not have caused it.

"Unless you are good enough to call *my* turning up 'something,' Miss Anne," he answered, forestalling Ida. "What a lucky chance it was I found you out!" he went on; and Anne, looking at him as they passed under a lamp, saw that, high-coloured as he generally was, a very perceptible addition of red had come into his face, from some cause or other.

"How was it?" she asked wondering, and mystified beyond everything as to *what* could have caused Ida's sudden and visible elation of spirits.

"Why, you see, London is so confoundly hot and stuffy just now, and I had no particular business on hand; so I thought I'd bring my mother down here for a few days. She thought of Brighton at first, but I said no: for I called at your house last week, and your sister told me you were here; so I thought to myself that if I were obliged to run up to town I should not leave her alone, for I thought as you've

always shown yourselves very good-natured to her, you'd call and look her up, you know. She's rather lonely you see, here in England; she hasn't had time to make new friends yet," concluded Mr. Alcott, rather apologetically.

"But you haven't said how you found out where we are staying?" said Anne, wearily, for the sake of saying something, while inwardly she was still marvelling at Ida's changed face. She looked so resolved—so decided; as if something had put new spirit into her altogether. Was it possible that she was feeling very much better? that her illness had taken a sudden turn for the better? "I suppose Julia gave you our address?"

"No—if she had there wouldn't have been anything lucky in it," he responded, eagerly—an eagerness that jarred somewhat on her. *She* was so wearied and jaded, and *he* was so fresh and strong. "Strange to say they don't know exactly where you are themselves, Miss Armour told me—I only saw her; your mamma was out—for she had burnt your last letter and forgotten the number of the house. But she told me the name of the street, so I said I would manage to root you out, if you were in Margate; and I have, you see."

A pause. Anne tried to catch Ida's eye, but she walked on as if in a trance, entirely absorbed in her own thoughts and with her serious face transfigured by a species of secret radiance. Anne felt more and more puzzled. "And does Mrs. Alcott like what she has seen of Margate?" she asked.

"Well, she hasn't been out yet. We're staying at the White Hart in the harbour; and she was so

tired that I left her after dinner and came out for a stroll by myself. As I happened to walk in your direction I thought I might as well try to find out your house; and as I went past, who should I see but your sister here looking out of the window. So I went in and asked for you, but you were out."

"Yes. I went towards Kingsgate—a place about three miles away. It is a pretty walk by the sea-side," said Anne, who was insensibly becoming somewhat cheered by the mere sound of his strong, hearty, good-natured voice and easy manner, in which there was also a very evident wish to make himself agreeable.

"What? by yourself?" with a concerned look, as her keen eyes told her, even though it was almost dark by this time.

"Yes. We know no one here."

"Ah! well, you'll know some one now I—now my mother has come," reassured as to the fact of her having been solitary during her ramble; though, certainly, most of the young women he had ever known would have been sorely puzzled for lack of something to do before they set out for a six-mile walk *alone*.

"And we shall see a good deal of you, I hope, Miss Anne. Miss Ida here was good enough to promise she and you will come for a long drive to-morrow afternoon, and to tea after—or dinner, which you like. Mother sticks to tea, while I take dinner; so we don't quarrel, but combine the two."

So! the mystery was out, and was no great mystery after all. Glad of anything to break the monotomy of their life, and as she was feeling com-

paratively strong, Ida welcomed the advent of the kind little widow as a godsend. Anne had not the heart to damp her pleasure by seeming to hang back, so acceded to the invitation without any demur; and after he had seen them home, and learnt at what part of the Parade they would be the next morning, he departed.

The air was cool now; and Anne, recovered from the fatigue of her walk by the excitement of the incident that concluded it, entered their little room with much better spirits than she had quitted it. Mrs. Claggart brought the candle in and laid the supper table—a very modest affair, consisting of a coarse, whitish-brown cloth spread on one end of the table, and the bread and butter, with a jug of water, and a bottle of wine for Ida.

Then by the candlelight she observed what she had not noticed before: her sister produced a splendid bunch of hot-house grapes from a brown-paper bag, and put them on the table with an air of much importance.

"Why, Ida!—where did you get those? what beauties!"

"Mr. Alcott bought them for me when we went out to see if we could find you," said the other, calmly.

"Did he really? how very kind," said the surprised Anne.

"Yes. And I have something more to tell you—good news, Anne," continued the invalid, while her generally quiet eyes shone with pleasure. "Mrs. Alcott has sent me a very handsome present—five guineas!—there, what do you think of that? And

now we can stay here a good deal longer, and need not be so cramped and half-starved as we have been. And I am going to save two of the guineas to have a physician's advice when we go back to London: I am sure Mr. James does not quite understand my illness. I always said if we had only money enough to have a very good doctor I should be quite well soon." And Ida began to pick the great bloom-covered grapes from the stalks, and eat them with fastidious appreciation. She had been longing for some only that afternoon, and was miserable because her sister refused—she was obliged to refuse—to buy her any.

Anne was stupefied. A crowd of so many different feelings rushed in on and overwhelmed her, that she could not for the moment find her voice for pure astonishment. She was so much surprised that she could hardly credit what was told her, until convinced by the sight of the money; and while she wondered with an ever-mounting marvelling, if it could be possible that Mr. Alcott was earnest in the attention he paid her, she asked herself if his mother had chosen this as one of the most acceptable, though not the most delicate ways, of testifying her approbation of her son's choice? What could she do? she asked herself, almost terrified. She could not—dare not—refuse any kindness they chose to show to her poor young sister. If through it her life, by some miracle, could yet be saved, it was absolutely her bounden duty to accept, with unutterable thankfulness, the help that was so generously offered—putting aside all thought of false pride or humiliation; and if she

could not be saved, but her days prolonged and made easy to her, it was still more incumbent on her to do anything—bear anything for her, even—yes, even if it came to giving up——

But it was not until she returned to the sitting-room, to pass the night on the chintz-covered sofa (for Ida had taken a fancy to be by herself all night, only would have Anne sleep within call, which, as the rooms adjoined, was easily arranged by opening the intermediate door), that she recollected what the young man had said about going out for a stroll, and then chancing to discover their whereabouts.

Mrs. Alcott, had she known she was going to see them the next day, would never have entrusted her present for Ida to her son; and besides, she did not know when he went out that he would go to seek them. *It was no present from her;* but a sudden thought of good-natured George Alcott, whose kind heart was probably touched by seeing how poor they must be to live in such a little, common cottage, and by observing how ill her sister was! Poor Anne's face was covered with a distressed blush for the instant; and then, the next second, her conscience told her that she must put away all shame—all personal feeling—and think only of Ida, and for her. And if it should be that payment was expected for such kindness as they gave—it should be given them; and some day, when he knew all, Julian would say she had acted well, and forgive her. When she reached this stage of her meditations, she began to cry very bitterly and resignedly, and sobbed herself to sleep.

The next afternoon they went, as invited, to where the Alcotts were staying at an hotel in the harbour, after having previously met with mother and son on the sands, and passed the morning with them. Mrs. Alcott had been very kind to the girls, although Anne fancied that at first there was some mixture of gravity in her looks and formality in her speech, when she came close up to them. But a few minutes' talking together had put all that to flight, and she was her own homely, pleasant self again; taking great care of Ida, and talking to and advising her upon her ailments in such a kind, motherly fashion, that Anne grew more and more pleased that she and her son had come to Margate, whatever might be the wind that had blown her thither. In the meanwhile George looked delighted at the progress their acquaintanceship was making, and invited Anne to come for a row with him, for the sea was as smooth as glass, and as blue as the sky that hung over it, and, after visible reluctance, she had been persuaded into going; Mrs. Alcott telling her that she would look after her sister until she came back. So she went, seeming somewhat troubled at first, which was put down by her companion to her being afraid to go on the water; and he began to laugh at her a little, and then grew *empressé* when reassuring her that he would take care there was no danger; and if there should be, he was a good swimmer, and made no doubt he would rescue her if the boat should chance to come to grief.

Telling herself privately that, but for Ida's sake, that would perhaps be the best way of putting an

end to all her present perplexities and coming sorrows, she and Mr. Alcott had gone off in a rowing boat, and passed a charming hour on the water, which would have been extended into two, but that Anne was firm in persisting in her wish to return to her sister. Besides, he was evidently becoming either very deeply head over ears in love with her, or else acted a remarkably good imitation of the same; and, in spite of her resolutions of the night before, Anne found it such hard work to keep from contrasting him with Julian, now she was face to face with him, and saw how much he lost by the comparison, that she could with difficulty respond to his advances in a sufficiently encouraging way. Poor George! his face was certainly not one calculated to show itself to the greatest advantage when he was looking sentimental, for he was fast sliding into that phase of the tender passion. So they walked back to where they left the others waiting, and then went to their respective homes for dinner, with the understanding they were to meet again in the afternoon.

Which they did, and the whole party took a conveyance, and had a long, pleasant drive along the level, white roads; through ranks of golden corn, standing up proudly in these last days of their beauty, for the harvest had already begun in some places, and soon the turn for these fields would come. The burning red of the poppies and vivid blue of the cornflowers, the staring white, yellow-centred daisies, and creeping, clinging wild convolvulus with delicate little rose-striped white flowers and spiky buds, made pretty diversions in the way of colour amongst the

all-pervading, thick, dark green of leaves and grass, and the glorious sheets of amber wheat fields scattered over the landscape. Deeply blue was the sky, and dazzlingly white the roads; a good deal of dust flying in some parts; not very pretty country, for it was rather flat, and there was not much timber about; Ida's little face, looking better and brighter than it had done for many a long day, leaning back on the drab cloth lining of the carriage under the shadow of a new hat bought that morning the first thing (with part of Mrs. Alcott's present, for which the girls had thanked her warmly, and she had replied very shortly, though pleasantly); Mrs. Alcott's kindly, sunburnt one, with her light blue eyes so like her son's;. George himself seated beside Anne, apparently in the seventh heaven of delight, and looking so happy, though very warm, that a feeling of remorse began to creep into her mind that, even if she consented to be his wife, she could bring him so little—so very little of her affections. All this she remembered long after so clearly, that if she but closed her eyes for a minute she could bring it all before her.

They drove past Kingsgate, with its ivy-covered, miniature castle, and over the bare, green country past the tall white North Foreland lighthouse into Broadstairs; and then back to Margate by many a pretty turn and winding of the road (for it was much less ugly in returning) and the air had been so fresh and soothing, although the day was a warm one, that Ida was not a bit tired, she said; and quite ready to enjoy herself during the evening. Then came some refreshments, in the shape of

mingled dinner and tea; and after that, while the invalid lay down to rest awhile on the sofa, and Mrs. Alcott, sitting near her in an armchair, dozed off in a succession of under-hand naps (for so much of the open air had made her sleepy), Mr. Alcott and Anne sat at one of the open windows of the large private sitting-room at the hotel, where, the lace curtains having been drawn back, they had a good view of the harbour and pier, with the glittering, heaving sea stretching out as far as the eye could reach.

They talked a good deal—at least he did—in lowered voices, so as not to disturb the others; and Anne, sitting there in a low armchair of crimson velvet, with a background formed by the white lace curtain thrown carelessly over the back of another behind her, and all the splendour of the setting sun lighting up her face and figure, was looking very beautiful, in spite of the anxious, worn look her face was beginning to take, and the more than simplicity —the actual poverty—visible in her appearance. A very old dress of some light-coloured muslin that had washed almost white, and was several years behind the fashion, besides being, to tell the exact truth, also a little too small for her (for her figure had grown considerably fuller since it had been made), and a plain band of pale blue ribbon in her hair. No earrings—no locket—no ornamental pins on her head; not even so much as a brooch to fasten her collar with, a little bow of the same ribbon as was in her hair doing duty instead. And very lovely she was; for, if ever a woman was superior to what dress could do for her, it was

Anne; with a rare amount of expression in her face and beautifully formed head, covered with her silky, rippling, golden hair which was gathered in a knot behind; the full-orbed, lustrous, dark eyes, and finely formed, delicate eyebrows, straight and long; the rather large mouth with lips full and red; the dimpled chin and soft, firm, pale cheeks. Generally too soft, both in features and expression, the events of the last few months had conspired together to give her a force that had before been wanting; an intensity and strength in her regard that elevated while it refined her style of beauty. And George Alcott, looking at her as she sat opposite to him, thought he had never seen any one or any picture so perfectly lovely; whether he looked at the small head set on its long round white throat, or the rounded shoulders and broad, full bosom; the large, soft arms, dimpled at the elbows like the chin (as he could see through their thin covering of muslin), or the pretty hands that lay passively clasped over each other on her knees. And if Anne had known his opinion she might have been flattered, for he was one of that large class of men in every rank who decline in a general way to think any woman is good-looking unless she is fashionably dressed.

And he and Anne sat there with the crimson sunset before them shining on the blue water in the harbour; and he talked, and she listened, until the purple twilight fell, invading the bright blue sky so gently that its effect was rather softening than darkening. While sitting there Anne began the lesson—the lesson we all have to learn at one time or another of our lives—to smile while our hearts

ache; and made herself very amiable and agreeable to her entertainer, who became more and more fascinated by her. She had not much to do, for he was a great talker in his way; and she had only to look at him now and then and smile as she asked her dexterously-put sentences, designed to lead him on, or feign a pretty interest, half-timid, half-admiring, at hearing of his mighty exploits when he was in the Bush with cattle. She kept him to like topics as much as she could, for she dreaded his becoming sentimental. She could not stand it yet, she told herself: she would be better able to bear it at some future time. And then they went on the pier for a little while, to please Ida and Mrs. Alcott, and to hear the band play; and afterwards George took them home.

So passed their first day, and, in much the same way, several others, until nearly a fortnight had run by. During that time, Anne had written home telling how it was that they were able to stay on still longer, and that Ida was seeming much better; but after that came a letter to Mrs. Armour saying that she had suffered a relapse, and was very ill. Either she had excited herself too much, or her complaint had taken a turn for the worse. She was in continual pain, and could not sleep, and longed as earnestly to return to London as she had before wished to stay at the sea-side.

CHAPTER VI.

IDA.

SO they returned to London. George Alcott took them back all the way, declaring he had business in town, and was obliged to be there at a certain time, even if they had not been going; and very kind and good he was to the poor sick child. If he had studied every way of gaining Anne's love, and decided on this, he could not have been more brotherly and tender to her sister. And Anne was very grateful and gentle to him. She was becoming daily more subdued—more indifferent to everything around her but what had some connexion with Ida. The affection hitherto subsisting between the two girls had never been very ardent, their characters were too strictly opposed on almost every single point for *that* to have been the case; but it was a very sincere one. And, with all their trials and misfortunes, death had never before entered the house—had never before met them face to face and boldly demanded one of their number; for the two younger Armours had been very little children when their own mother had died, and they recollected almost nothing about her. The first death in a household is a dreadful thing, and it is almost worse before than after it has occurred. Very closely were the hearts of Anne and Ida knit during these days, for

alas! they were not much more; the end was nearer than any one, even the doctor, expected. From the heights of her more serious and matured character, the youngest sister had been rather in the habit of looking down on Anne, as one who was both weak-minded and frivolous; and she had also long shared in the prevailing impression of the household that she was little better than a hardened heathen. But in these last weeks, when the veil which hides or disguises so many things to our eyes, was growing gradually thinner and thinner, the perceptions of the one who was so soon to die, finer and more acute—her sensations more exquisitely sensitive—she looked on all things with very altered opinions; although, all the time, she evidently hoped and sometimes believed she should recover. Instinctively she began to feel there was far more real sympathy between her and Anne than between her and any one else. She comprehended that Anne understood her better, and felt for her more fully, than either her stepmother or Julia. Perhaps too, there was something to be said on account of their very different temperaments. Mrs. Armour and her eldest daughter were rather fidgety, and the poor invalid's nerves at last could not bear them much about her; while Anne was slower and quieter, and always carried about with her a species of rest and strength in her very appearance. And she was very patient too, and would sit up for hours, not attempting to move, close beside her sofa or pillow, without being *asked* to remain. For, when they came back to London, Ida had been terribly ill; and after the pains and sufferings were exhausted

she was prostrated with intense weakness, attended with an unspeakable depression: and no one but Anne could give her comfort — what comfort she could receive. Often when physical weakness has been at its greatest height, the mere bodily support of a strong arm strengthens and encourages —puts new life into the feeble—and, in nervous complaints, the mere touch of firm, insensible, unimpressionable flesh, is tranquillizing and refreshing. Every one knows how much better it is for old and weak persons to live in the house with young, strong ones; the very irritation that is produced by the exciting contrast is healthful.

Mrs. Alcott had returned from the sea-side, and come back to her apartments at her friend's house near the Armours. She was very kind to Ida, kinder than ever, Anne thought; and gentle and considerate with her herself, although never entirely cordial. She had consented to her son's wish to marry this girl; but, with a mother's unerring instinct, she felt she did not love him; and there was a grave resentment in her heart against her for encouraging him to seek her. Personally, she both liked and pitied, though did not quite understand her. Her twisted and rather complex character puzzled the simple little widow; and she would have much shocked her had they been more intimately acquainted. But this never came to pass. Each mistrusted the influence of the other upon George Alcott; and Anne always took care never to show either temper or her real self (when she was tempted to say anything at all out of the way, or that was not perfectly simple and commonplace) before

her future mother-in-law. She did not desire her game spoilt when it was so nearly won. She had given up too much to be able to contemplate with equanimity the loss of the object she had tried so much to attain.

For, a few days before she had quitted Margate, she had written one last letter to Julian, telling him everything and bidding him farewell. The little locket he had given her was returned, too, and every scrap of writing he had ever sent her. Twenty times a day since Anne told herself that she had been wise in so doing, remembering the old song—

> "It is best to be off with the old love
> Before you are on with the new;"

and twenty times a night, when, starting from a broken sleep, her hand mechanically felt for the locket round her neck, and missing it, she remembered what she had done, she told herself she had acted madly. But the morning light and the almost daily presents to Ida that came from either Mrs. or Mr. Alcott, brought her back to her first decision. Yes: she had done well. Had she acted differently she could never have forgiven herself. She *dare* not fully intend to accept a man, from whom she expected a proposition of marriage every time she saw him, while she still corresponded with and was engaged to another, whom, too, she loved with all her heart.

One afternoon about this time, Anne was sitting in the downstairs sitting-room at work. The school had been given up entirely this quarter, there were so few pupils, and the noise they made being

irritating to the poor invalid, who scarcely ever slept at night, and whose only snatches of rest were obtained during the day. She was enjoying one of these intervals from almost unceasing pain now, and her sister was posted at the window to open the street door if she saw any one coming, before they were able to knock or ring, for fear of disturbing her. Anne was sewing industriously away at the grounding of a sofa cushion in woolwork, which employment she had succeeded in obtaining at a little shop where "ladies' fancy-work was made up;" and where, from time to time, customers whose patience had been exhausted in forming the flowers, sent their work to have their backgrounds put in. The usual "young lady" who assisted the mistress of the shop, when she had more than she could do herself, chanced to be away in the country, when Anne one day came in and inquired if she could give her anything to do. She offered her the completion of this sofa-cushion, which was gladly accepted, and promised her more if it were done well. So Anne spent every minute of time she had to spare, at her work, and found it a great soother to her harrowed mind and body to sit sewing quietly and mechanically. For, as the days went on, her stepmother and Julia seemed, to her jarred and irritated nerves, to become more and more disagreeable and grating to her. Presuming on her accustomed shrinking from their presence on every possible occasion, they took complete possession of the sick-room, or rather rooms, for Ida did not keep her bed, but lived as much in the upstairs drawing-room as in her bedroom knowing

well that wherever *they* were, she was sure not to be. The invalid took her half desertion of her very quietly, for Anne told her privately that she *could not* stay in the same room with her step-mother, especially; she would work like a slave, if it were required, in the kitchen, or anywhere, so long as she was not where Mrs. Armour or Julia were.

"You are quite right, Anne, if you cannot keep from quarrelling," she had responded, apathetically. Nothing but what concerned her health seemed to affect her much, one way or another, now.

She had had a restless, weary night; and quite worn-out, was sleeping quietly. Very anxiously, in spite of her attention to her occupation, Anne listened to each footstep that came or went in the street. She rather expected either Mr. or Mrs. Alcott to call, and so felt no surprise when, on looking up, she descried the former passing the railings in front of the house. Seeing her, he raised his hat, flushing perceptibly as he did so; and Anne, making a hasty sign to him, rose and hurried quietly to the door to admit him. He came up, looking pleased.

"I was afraid of your knocking, for Ida is asleep," she explained softly, as she ushered him into the room she had just quitted, and closed the door gently. "Mamma is with her, and Julia is out."

"Never mind—I didn't want to see them at all—that is," correcting himself hastily, "I wanted to see *you*, most."

He sat down, and Anne, with a slight apology, resumed her work. She had begun to be even a little impatient with him, that he was not more

expeditious in his manner of wooing. He came frequently, stopping as long as he decently could; and stared and stared at her all the time, but had never spoken the decisive words yet. Anne felt herself growing harsh and unwoman-like as she sat there, knowing pretty well what he was thinking of, and despising him with all her scornful heart for not speaking out. But there was to be no longer delay, it seemed. He was pleasurably excited respecting news he had just heard from the lawyer in whose hands he had placed his affairs on coming to England. This gentleman had discovered some most important items: his right would be soon perfectly recognised to belong to a very old family in Northumberland. His father was still *alive*. He was a younger son of the elder branch, and had changed his name it was believed on his marriage with a lady in one of the midland counties. Both parties had thus married again, each believing the other to be dead.

Mr. Alcott told Anne he did not anticipate any great increase of wealth upon his birthright being clearly proved; but added, that he did not care for that, as he had plenty of his own.

And then he asked her would she marry him.

And Anne very quietly and coldly accepted him. He did her great honour, she told him, and she would try to make him a good wife. His honest joy was so unaffected and so plainly perceptible, that she softened afterwards, and was very gentle and pleasant with him, although she winced painfully when he put his arm round her and kissed her.

She found an opportunity for telling Ida about

it that evening, when she was alone with her for a few minutes. The poor child was feeling rather better, after a longer sleep than ordinary; and seemed to take more interest in the account of her sister's acceptance of the offer made by Mr. Alcott than she had done in anything for a long time. She was fond of Mrs. Alcott, and felt very friendly towards her son. He had been very kind and good to her, bringing her fruit and flowers, wine and books—anything she fancied.

"I should like to see you married, Minnie," she said, using a pet name she sometimes gave to her sister. "You would look very nice—and be all in white silk and lace, wouldn't you? Or would you have satin?"

"Not satin, I think—I am too fat," said Anne, absently.

"So you are—poor old fattie! And you used to think you would marry Julian—Mr. Home! But people change like things; nothing stands fast except God," and Ida sighed heavily. "Think, Anne, 'the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever.' If He is not going to take some one to heaven, nothing can make Him alter His will—no prayers, no tears, no repentance, however sincere."

"And if He means to save any one, He will do it. I don't think many people will not go to heaven, Ida. The world is so full of sorrow—people suffer so long and intensely here, that surely, surely, God will give almost every one an eternity in which to heal the scars Time's wounds have left with them while on earth," said Anne, letting her head fall wearily on her hands.

"That is mere supposition, Anne; the Bible speaks a great deal about wicked people going to hell; and not only the wicked—ah! not only the wicked—not only the wicked! but all those 'who forget God.' And who can—who has ever remembered Him constantly? And I—have I done so?"

"Have I—has any one?" Anne hurried to say. "I *don't* believe any one will be unhappy in another world if they have not been very wicked in this—I don't indeed. Why, how can people be expected to be perfectly pure, perfectly without sin, when the only one that was ever conqueror of it was God Himself? If it took Him to subdue evil—how can we do *more* than contend with it—prevent it overcoming us? Ida, that is all we can do. Let us do our best, and hope God will make it all right for us when we die."

"Those are what mamma calls your atheistical opinions, are they not?" asked Ida. "However, it doesn't matter what they are, since truth will always stand, be it never so attacked. Do you know, Anne, that if I had my life to live over again, I should certainly act very differently to what I have done, in several ways. I would have gone out as a little nurse girl, if I could have got papa's and mamma's consent; indeed, seeing as I do now, I consider it would have been right, both for myself and for them, to have done so even *without* their approbation, if I could not have gained it. They would have felt it at first a little, no doubt, and called it degradation; but I ought not to have remained a useless burden upon their hands; and besides"—Ida hesitated a minute, and then

went on—"I hardly ever had enough to eat at home—I should have got better fed somewhere else; and I think that has told on my health, and helped to make me as weak as I am. I should have been too young for a servant, and too ignorant for a governess, although I could have taught music well; and these doors being closed to me, I ought to have done anything else I could find. I like little children, and I think they would have got fond of me. You remember the Mary in the Bible of whom Jesus Christ said: 'She hath done what she could?' She was a poor woman, I suppose, and could only do a little; but that little she did, and I had rather have been able to say that of myself than anything else in the world, Anne; but I cannot. I had only a little I *could* do, and I have not done it."

"Very few people have done all they could," murmured her sister, hiding her face in her hands to conceal the tears that sparkled in the firelight. "Have I? has any one?"

"And I should have been happier, Anne—the work would have brought its own reward. Being at home, and able to do nothing (because I did not see so clearly as I do now), and thinking of all our miseries and papa's bills—the bills incurred for us—I used to grow rebellious and murmur against God in my heart. It would have been better to try to help myself, and the others through me; would it not, Anne? Is it not sad that we cannot see the right thing to do at the right time?"

For all answer, Anne burst into a passion of tears. "Oh, Ida, poor Ida! do you think we'd have let

you do it? Oh, my poor little sister! My poor Ida!"

"Why not, Anne? There could have been no sin in doing so; and when people—when people are very ill and weak they seem to see clearer what is right and what is wrong; for, although expediency should be also consulted, it is not everything. I thought of trying to get a place somewhere, several times; but seemed not to have energy enough to exert myself when it came to the point. I was afraid of asking permission to do it, lest there should be any disagreeableness—I was frightened at myself, for fear it would make me ill; and, more than all, I began to fear the imaginary children I might have to attend to. I shrank from the idea of their rough voices, their loud screams, and passionate ways; and sometimes, when in passing through the streets I have seen how naughty children were, I felt troubled and faint-hearted at thinking I could not manage them. I was so young, Anne; if I had been older I would have found work somehow; as it is—perhaps it is all for the best. . . . . I have a feeling sometimes in my heart that perhaps God is very good to us, though we cannot see it."

"That is it, Ida. If we could only look up—only lift up our eyes! We are so ignorant about God."

She made no answer, and then the talk dropped.

In the bounded sphere around the dying each trifle becomes of consequence, until it is magnified into an importance that far larger things wanted before. Who has not remarked, when tending some dear life that was nearing its close,

the peculiar interest some chance visitor—an ornament on the chimney-piece—the preparation of a wished-for dainty—the position of some article of furniture in the room—excites? It had been so with Ida for a time; but now even that faded.

A great sickness of heart—death's sure precursor—was stealing upon her. All sounds had lost their pleasantness—all sights their beauty—all tastes their enjoyment—all pleasures their zest. What to her were all the simple things that had once delighted her? Nothing—nothing; not worth the lifting of tired eyelids—the touch of nerveless hands. She lay on her bed with half-opened sad eyes, seeing nothing, and feeling—now pain itself was leaving her, as if contemptous of the wreck it had made—nothing but a dull numbness of mind accompanying the fading senses of the body; with a dim consciousness of a background formed by an immensity of blackest woe, so dark that not one ray of light could ever cross it. If for one instant her thoughts were beguiled from their shrouding of inexpressible sadness, it was for no longer space of time. The partially-diverted mind relapsed again into its dark abyss of unvarying, utter melancholy; the half-formed smile faded from the weary lips, the eyes retreated into themselves once more, and set in the dull apathy of a pain that would never be cured on earth.

Mrs. Armour had asked her if she would like to see a clergyman, and she had answered "No" at first; then, on her stepmother remonstrating with her, she yielded, quietly observing—"As you wish it, mamma. He can do me no harm, if he does me no good. It is a sort of warrant, I suppose, to the

world that I have died a Christian—like the attendance of a doctor shows there has been no foul play. By all means—have one by-and-by; but not now. I am not able enough to listen to any one for. . . . . What was I saying? I seem to forget."

"The light is too strong for you," said Mrs. Armour, lowering the blind; for Ida was lying on the couch in the drawing-room. However ill she was, if it were possible for her to get up, she would do so yet.

"Thank you, mamma. It does not matter much now; nothing matters, I——" And her eyes closed. She seemed to have got into a way of late of finishing many of her sentences to herself, fancying that she said them aloud.

The next day was Sunday. All the morning she had been comparatively easy, but had spoken very little; she was restless, too, and her eyes had a longing, searching look, as she was helped to move about the room. What did they see? What were they looking for? Alas! who can say what the dying think of—what thoughts pass through the half-conscious mind? She consented silently to go to bed towards the end of the afternoon, when Mrs. Alcott, who came, proposed her doing so; and then the former having promised to sit by her for a time, she fell into a sort of slumber, the widow holding in her hand one of those poor thin ones of Ida's, which had been so clever in its time. Alas! that it had come to have this said of it—"in its time!" That time was fast ending now; not many hours before——

Mrs. Alcott then sat beside her bedside. Mrs.

Armour and Julia, both weary with watching, for they had been faithful nurses, were resting themselves by lying down for awhile. Anne and Mr. Armour had been packed off to church—being told they were not wanted, and the house must be kept quiet. Poor Mr. Armour was always ready to do anything for peace' sake; and Anne went with him.

Mrs. Armour was rather wont to disturb Anne by her demeanour at church. She had a trick of passing the open Bible referring to the text of the sermon in a commanding manner; and of glancing in such a pointed and impressive way at her rebellious stepdaughter if any part of the discourse or hymns especially alluded to stiff-necked sinners, that it was calculated to render the culprit conspicuous. Anne, unfortunately for herself, would colour vividly on these occasions; and experience a strong temptation to return the look by such a furious one that the well-regulated minds around her would be impressed by a startled conviction that she must be very wicked indeed. Then Mrs. Armour would look meekly down at her kid gloves, conspicuously more in sorrow than anger. So Anne did not like to go to church with her, at all; and generally managed—if the family went *en masse*—to be one of the outside ones, unless she sat next to her father. She was this evening alone with him; moral force half propelling her to church, and half going there by her own freewill, to be out of the atmosphere of her sad home. But she passed a two hours of great misery.

"Ida is going to die—she is going to die!" she found herself repeating inwardly, over and over

again, while her tear-dimmed, yearning eyes wandered round and round the church, as if seeking for some human help in her need. "Ida is dying—she is dying!" her heart kept on crying imploringly, as if to a friend who could help or sympathize with her. "What shall I do?—oh, what *can* I do? If I had only a few guineas out of the purse of that fat, rich-looking man in the corner, over there to the right, sitting so comfortably with his kind-looking wife and well-dressed girls, beside him; oh, what good they *would* do! I wonder if I went up to him after church, and told him how poor we were, and asked him to give me some money, if he would do it? It is a chance—but such a bare one! But of course he would do no such thing. The kindest person in the world would never give to a stranger; and I dare not tell our name, nor where we live. No one must know—we must keep very much to ourselves, because we are well-born. It is no shame to run in debt, and beg from one's relations; but after that, we must shut the door and let no one know! 'A collection towards the repairs of this church' is there to be? Certainly; quite right! I wonder how many Sundays free from collections for one thing or another, there are in the year at some churches —especially those in a poor neighbourhood such as this is. I wonder if Mr. and Miss Armour are going to contribute to the blessed work? I am almost afraid *not*, this evening! As dear mamma says, 'It is one of the saddest trials of being in embarrassed circumstances that of not being able to help in the Church.' Oh, I could strike her when she says such things! And look at us! look at *us*, with hardly a

rag to our backs, or food to eat, and in debt *everywhere!* and, to crown all, Ida dying: as distinctly killed by our poverty and its effects in various ways, as though her death were deliberately planned! We, who are older and stronger and wickeder, may win through it—but *she*, she—O God, have pity on her!—don't let her die just yet!"

To describe Anne's perfect passion of emotion as she sat motionless there beside her father—who, excellent man! was not bothering his head about disagreeable things which could not be helped, but attending strictly to his religious duties, with an appearance of virtuous and thorough approval of the whole service—would be impossible. She was very thankful that the veil she had put on to help to conceal her shabby bonnet, although very old, was yet sufficiently thick to disguise the expressions of her face, and cover the quiet, miserable tears that at intervals fell from her filled eyes, and rolled down her cheeks. Those, and those only, who possess a nature naturally prone to extremes, both of joy and grief—for whom there has been once a time when all around them has seemed hopeless and drear, feeling, too, that they are being irresistibly urged on to a sorrow more great than they have ever yet encountered, a sorrow that the richest, greatest person in the world is impotent against—can alone thoroughly feel for, or even understand what she went through that memorable Sunday evening; others, to whom fate has been more kind, must inevitably be disposed to think of her with contempt, as exaggerated and morbid.

Oh, her loneliness in that praying crowd of well-

dressed, decorous strangers! her isolation, though her father was beside her! To her tortured ears, the rolls of majestic sound that poured through the air over the heads of the congregation from the organ gallery, and the accompanying sea of responsive voices singing a loud triumphal hymn of praise, seemed like mocking, exulting demons, who revelled in her repressed miseries. Oh, how far away—how very far—God was! higher much than that arched, dark-beamed roof, which was filled with a haze of golden light from the united jets of many gas-burners—higher even than the dark grey sky above it, where not a glimmer of light reminded the world that the stars and yellow moon shone serenely in the blue heavens all the time, although, owing to the thick clouds, they were invisible on earth. Could He hear that loud singing, and pay no attention to the pitiful cries for help in her great need that were torn from her heart? It seemed to Anne as if He *must hear* her—that it was impossible such an amount of human agony should fail to attract attention, even though she was too much beside herself to frame direct petitions. When the pain of the mind is surpassingly great, its power of suggesting remedies is gone; all supplication ceases—prayer cannot be formed. The numbed soul throws itself before its Maker, in all the eloquence of its awful need: it can do no more. Then as tears came to her burning eyes, that agony of mental wrestling with an unseen might, the last desperate throwing off her sorrow before One whose *Power* to help she acknowledged—whose *Will* she could not but doubt (seeing how relentlessly afflic-

tion of the heaviest kind had been allotted to the weakest, the most blameless of them all), passed into a less keen, less painful mood. Had it not done so, Anne felt she would have been obliged to get up and leave the church; for, retaining but a dim consciousness of the surrounding crowd, except with a species of sullen, resentful fancy that they were all opposed to her—that they were contending against her in some way so that God might not hear her—she was aware that she must have given vent to her pent-up feelings by screaming aloud.

But the blessed relief of tears came, and the excitement that had nearly overcome her was quieted. Mechanically she had knelt down when that dreadful hymn was finished (would she ever hear "Sound the loud timbrels" again without remembering what she went through that evening?) but forgetful of where she was, she did not rise when the text was given out, until startled by her father tapping her on the shoulder. Comforted that the alternate rising and kneeling were at last over, and that she should not need to move again until they left the church, she drew her old cloak around her closer, and leant back, trying to rest herself as well as the improved church-sittings (whose backs were so low that they were clearly not made for comfort) would allow. For a few minutes, had it been to save her life, she could not have told of what she was thinking; a dulness as of drowsiness came over her, and she found herself repeating sentences she had heard spoken, or read, or that came into her head; sentences without connexion with each other, and of no particular sense in themselves. Sometimes she

would not complete one; another, she would pick up in the middle, as though carrying on words that some one else had begun. The waves of emotion had passed over her, and left her quite calm and lethargic at last. She folded her hands resignedly under her cloak and looked stupidly and half-unconsciously before her. Then the preacher caught her attention; and with a cold, sneering criticism she examined each feature in his face—followed each movement of head or hand—feeling a feeble bitterness against him for being, as she decided, both stupid and ungainly. And she felt sure too, she could preach better than he did; would *she* leave her audience quiet and emotionless as his was? All at once she caught sight of Ida's doctor, who attended the church; he was a young, clever, overworked man, whose flesh seemed to have been worn and worried off his bones, by ceaseless, gnawing anxiety, and intense application to the duties of his profession. He was leaning his elbow on the side of the seat and covering his eyes with his hand. She had noticed him occupy this position immovably for a long, long time, but though she had seen him, she had not sufficiently observed him so as to recognise him. "That man has Ida's dear life in his hands," she thought; "can he be thinking of something that might save her?" Then her eyes passed him by, and roved over the church.

All at once her attention was caught by a gentleman entering quietly by the door, and looking around as if in search of some one. It was Mr. Alcott.

She grew at once into an agony of suspense, and touching her father's arm, she whispered to him that she feared he was come to look for them. Just then, to her boundless relief, the service ended and they left the church. George Alcott was waiting impatiently for them at the end of the aisle until they came up. "She is worse?" asked Anne, when near enough to speak.

He nodded. "She was taken soon after you left the house. I have been to the doctor's, but *he* was out, too. I left a message for him to come directly he returned."

"Papa, I am going on first; you'll come as fast as you can?" And without more words, Anne darted on ahead; through the dark air and along the quiet streets, where the lamplight fell brightly on the spot of pavement immediately beneath it, and on the decorous groups of church-goers, who were returning from their devotions to their cold meat suppers, and the conversation of any friends who chanced to drop in. Alcott came hurrying after her, and catching her arm, passed it through his; helping her onward quicker, yet at the same time, less conspicuously, than she could have got along by herself.

She got home somewhow: she never remembered how. The doctor was already there, and giving directions. There was no hope; all that could be done was to wait patiently for the end.

Ida was lying very quietly—just as Anne had seen her before going to church—looking much as she had done while in health. The bright colour was unchanged, but around her eyes were dark,

purple rings, left by days of weary suffering—by nights of agonizing pain. For she had suffered greatly.

Late on in the night, George Alcott took his mother home, she promising to come up early in the morning. Even at that sorrowful, supreme moment, Anne had to fight with herself to remain in the same room with her stepmother, whose real detestation of the girl was now showing itself, with all outward disguise of religion and propriety stripped off. Strong dislike and contemptuous disapproval showed itself in every glance of her lowering eye directed towards her stepdaughter; and Anne was scarcely kept from openly challenging her to show cause for such unbridled and revolting insolence and hardness of soul as was so clearly made manifest, even by her slightest gesture. Not more sincerely and intensely did her stepdaughter loathe her, than Mrs. Armour loathed her in return. Julia, on the contrary, was much softened; she cried much, and was thoroughly subdued. For the first time in her life, Anne fully distinguished the one from the other—the stronger nature from the weaker one—the instrument from the hand that wielded it.

Towards midnight Ida began to wander, and the lips, so reserved before, in death seemed able to keep nothing back. Each thought that passed through the mind of the dying one found whole or partial expression.

"Death is like a skeleton—I wonder if I shall see him when he comes for me? O God! wont you let me live a little longer?—or else give me some hope—only a little hope—as to where I am going? *Must* I really go down—down to hell—

for ever? If there could only be a purgatory, like Catholics say there is—a place of great torment, it is true, but a limit to it—something to look forward to, however faint and far away it may be. . . . . Oh, what *have* I done that I should go down to the fiery pit, and wither and shriek there in agony for evermore? Lord God help me—have mercy! are there not wickeder people than I to go there? . . It is no use—God is cruel—He will not have . . . ." And the words died off into indistinct murmurs.

There was something unutterably pathetic, terribly pathetic, in the wanderings of the, till then, deeply reserved child and girl—in the complete uncovering of the naked heart. The last utterances of her lips on earth were destined to be as frank, as true, as if indeed she was already disembodied, and, incapable of falsehood or concealment, standing at the feet of Him before whom "all hearts are open."

"Hold me fast—keep me! Don't let me go! I am sure you could keep me if you would only try hard enough." And the tears—the last tears—rolled slowly from under the half-closed eyelids, and fell heavily upon the pillow. "Pray—pray! Can't any one pray for me? I can't—I can't—*my heart is dead;* I have no more prayers left! Think—*think!* how horrible! *dead* though still alive—ah!" with a deep-drawn breath, more thrilling than any shriek could have been to the breathless listeners around her bed—"Where shall I be to-morrow? where?—where?

"God—wont you let me live? I am so young to die! I *will* try to live nearer to Thee—to

guard my tongue from speaking hastily—to win others to seek Thee—if I may only live a little longer." . . . . .

These were her last connected sentences. All that dreadful night she spoke at intervals, but the sentences became more and more indistinct and disjointed, and at last stopped altogether. Then came a long interval of solemn silence, and then—

* * * * *

Just before sunrise Ida died.

The week that followed, Anne never clearly recollected as a whole. Here and there, from amidst the mist, stood out conspicuously certain incidents therein, however. She saw her sister lying in her coffin, and she and the others helped to make the mourning to go to the funeral in. Mr. Alcott was very good to them all, and did everything he could.

Those only among my readers who have suffered in a like way can imagine or understand the dull agony of pitiful sorrow with which Anne stood beside the bed and looked down on the white face of her young sister—pale and calm and sad as the morning star. Except that her brilliant colour had utterly disappeared, Ida looked much, in these first hours of her death, as she had done in life, during those rare periods of her illness when she was free from pain. What could be fairer, what purer or more touching, than that slender waxen figure, with—

" Weak, thin hands so meekly folded ?"

Not a flower to soften the rigid severity of the white-draped bed, or placed about the room; nothing lovely—nothing sweet, except the faded and forlorn human blossom that lay there—ah! so unutterably sad and solemn.

They had thought of buying some flowers, but it was late in the autumn and no natural ones were to be had; and greenhouse ones cost money. So they did not buy any; for there was not a shilling more than was absolutely necessary in the house, and not a penny of that could be spent, except for the funeral. And there were no friends, even humble ones, to bring so much as a poor bunch of violets for one whose only strongly-marked preference, beside music, during her short life, had been for flowers. No! In death, as in life, no softening of harsh things for Ida—no dregs to be left undrained of the bitter cup that must come to us all sooner or later, but which had been presented to her with only so much warning as added poignancy to its unutterable anguish.

No feathers on the hearse—they would have swelled the funeral expenses by thirty shillings; the charges connected with the preparation of the grave were presented for settlement in the church almost before the half of the service was read, as if the very men—unwitting though they must have been of the trials that embittered the existence which had been shortened by them—were anxious to pay a last insult. The clergyman came carelessly hurrying over the graves in indecorous haste, instead of, as usual, preceding the procession when it left the church, and literally

galloped over the concluding words of the service at express speed.

But Anne, dry-eyed and resigned, while marking all the above incidents with a separate pang for each, as she stood by the red gravel pit to see the last of her sister, observed that, as if God had at last deigned to bless what all men seemed united in despising and making little of, as the pall was taken off the coffin, the grey sky was illumined by a sudden, bright, dazzling glory of golden sunshine—the sunshine which had been denied to her on earth had come to mourn for her at her grave. And with the bright light glistening on the narrow house of all that remained of a creature who was born into a world that seemed to have no need of her, the coffin sank slowly below the surface of the ground, as the last words were finished at a run, which spoke much for the oiliness of the tongue-hinges of the reverend gentleman, but very little for any feeling of either respect for the dead or humanity to the living he might have been possessed of.

And the mourners went away and left her there.

CHAPTER VII.

JOAN IN LONDON.

THE journey of Joan up to town was marked by nothing particular. It was a long way, however, and she was beginning to get very tired and restless before she came to the end of it. It brought her old life back to her very vividly, this travelling alone, and at first she had even felt a little bit shy at being quite by herself with strangers; for during the last year she had been very seldom solitary, and while at her aunt's she was never allowed to go anywhere unattended. But shaking off the feeling as a pusillanimous one, she looked boldly round her and out of window, and soon lost all sense of bashfulness as she realized the very great difference there would now be in her position to what there had been but a few hours before. It was her own act, however, and of course she must abide by it.

Good Mrs. Evans met her at the terminus, and was full of congratulations at seeing her look so well and strong; and then, her luggage being sorted out from amidst a multitude of other people's, a cab was called, and they drove off to Camden Town. Arrived there, the traveller was shown her rooms, and was very pleased with them. It seemed so like old times to see the familiar objects she had known all her life, and the portraits of the dear

[illegible] for ever [illegible] above [illegible] them [illegible] wrong [illegible] was too [illegible] healed [illegible] not [illegible] were for- [illegible] loved, [illegible] had [illegible] not [illegible] should be [illegible] them [illegible] faithful [illegible] much [illegible] time [illegible] smile [illegible] of [illegible] up [illegible] her [illegible] grave. [illegible] a [illegible] her [illegible] of [illegible] if she [illegible] a great [illegible] for her to [illegible] when she was many thousands of miles away that they were safely here in England, locked [illegible] and guarded as treasured memorials. And after many years had passed, when she should be quite

an old woman herself, and Mrs. Evans would be dead too, she would come back to the land where *they* had lived and died; and, when her feelings were as withered as her cheeks would be, she would receive back those dear pictures, and while she lived would have them always with her. Though the water stood in her bright eyes as she looked at the poor little likenesses, the very sight of them did her great good, giving her back all, even more, of her old courage and perseverance; and invigorated and strengthened, she turned away.

Mrs. Evans was bustling round to get some tea, for it was far on in the afternoon, and Joan felt and acknowledged herself to be most prosaically hungry; and she had so much to tell her hostess about what was before her, as well as about the happy life she had been living all these months past with her relations. So she took off her travelling things, and then sat down to hot buttered muffins and tea, and while she eat, chattered almost as fast. Having electrified Mrs. Evans by declaring the purpose for which she had come to London, she went on to say that, if she secured the governess situation (which she confidently expected), she should in all probability start on her long voyage in less than a month's time.

The good woman listened in silence, with a half-remonstrating, half-patient air; for she knew Joan of old, and was well aware that the very way to egg her on to a scheme was to endeavour to persuade her against it; and finally remarked with a disappointed air, "Well, I always thought that lady would have done something for you, Miss Joan, so

as there should be no necessity of your going out to those foreign parts, wherever they may be."

"So she has, Hannah, so she has," said Joan, eagerly; "or at least she tried to; but she is not rich, you know, and has a daughter of her own."

Mrs. Evans sat awhile longer, ruminating silently, and at last looking up with a smile, said, "You want a good husband to take care of you, Miss Joan—that's what *you* want; and that's what I'd rather hear of happening to you than anything."

"Well, Hannah, I might have had *two*. There! what do you think of that?" rejoined Miss Thornherst, helping herself to another piece of hot muffin, and eating away enjoyingly as she spoke; "it's quite true, I assure you; and rich men, also."

"Then why didn't you have one of them?" demanded Mrs. Evans, rather magisterially, bending a scrutinizing look on her young guest through her spectacles.

"Didn't like either of them," answered Joan, coolly, and handing up her cup for some more tea. "I don't want to marry at all, you know."

Mrs. Evans filled her cup, and dropped in sugar and milk in silence, and then sighed a little, patiently. She was not a particularly sighing woman, but Joan had always been rather too much for her, as, indeed, she was for many people.

"I never see such a gell in my life!" she finally remarked, rather despairingly. "Why didn't you try to like one of the gentlemen, Miss Joan? You know poor aunt would think as I do if she were here; that it would be much the best thing you could do to marry some nice young gentleman as

could give you a good home and everything comfortable about you, instead of your going off by yourself in this fashion, the Lord knows where."

Then Joan went into a long narration of things in general, and the two offers she had received in particular. Mrs. Evans listened attentively, and sometimes laughed (for she was a merry soul, though few women could have had many more troubles than she had during her fifty years of life), but oftener looked grave and regretful, and shook her head ominously when Joan finished.

"But, come now, Hannah—you wouldn't have had me marry any one I didn't like, would you—however rich he might have been?" she wound up, coaxingly. She had a very tolerable love of approbation, this young woman, and didn't like any one to disapprove of her or her doings. But although a strong advocate for love-marriages, Mrs. Evans wouldn't be brought to see otherwise than that the young lady before her was the most reckless, most headstrong and imprudent of "gells." If one of her own daughters had expressed like sentiments, she would have been strongly inclined to cast her off for ever; but all the young Evanses were well married and settled in life; and, although only Joan's contemporaries, were at this time all more or less endowed with babies.

However, she was won over somewhat at last to think as she did, or at least to make the best of circumstances; and then, the short afternoon drawing to a close, Mr. Evans came home from his work, and Joan retired into her solitary parlour, where, with pens and paper before her, she began writing

various letters. Tired out by excitement, she went to bed early that night, and slept very soundly in her unfamiliar bed. In the morning she went out to walk about in the vicinity, and look at the shops; and in the afternoon, accompanied by Mrs. Evans, went to the house of Mrs. Miles, who had written to her concerning the engagement in New Zealand. With a fast-beating heart she waited until the door of the room into which they were shown opened, and the lady, who all unconsciously held the strings of her future destiny in her hands, entered.

When Joan left the house, it was with a proud step and sparkling eye. It was done: she had succeeded. Everything excepting the references had been arranged; and Mrs. Miles was to write for these without delay. In a month's time from that date she was to set out for her new home, and must see about her preparations without loss of time. She received some good advice as to what she would require from Mrs. Miles, who had not long herself returned from Otago, where she had married, having gone out there with her family while still a little child. Joan was triumphant and glad. "She *knew* she should succeed," she said. But Mrs. Evans looked sorrowfully at her, and shook her head again more gravely than ever.

"And how about your pa and sisters, Miss Joan? you ain't surely going without ever saying good-bye to them?" she said.

"I am going to write to them to-night to tell them it is all settled," she replied, excitedly, "and if they want to see me perhaps they will send me enough to go to France to say good-bye to them;

but if they do not, I have no money to spare in going there. It doesn't matter. I should have liked to see papa; but as for the others——" And the smile that ended the sentence was significant enough.

Joan wrote to her aunt, also, that evening; she was to be one of her referees, and must be warned that she would be applied to. And then she went out with Mrs. Evans to make sundry purchases in clothes, the materials of which she would cut out herself, and send to a neighbouring sewing-machine to complete. She was hard at work all the next morning, and after an early dinner, determined to enjoy herself during the afternoon. Mrs. Evans being busy, she set off by herself. It was one of the days when the British Museum was open; and she selected it as the first place she should go to see. "There wont be many nice things and places to look at over there," she thought, "and I'll see all the sights I can before I go. I shall be quite an old woman, I suppose, when I come to London again—if I ever do."

So she trotted importantly along until she came to the well-known iron railings and sentry-box. Up the flights of stone steps she went, and then found herself among the stuffed elephants and rhinosceroses. Gravely she coasted round the big black bodies, and presently walked off her fresh pink face and wide-awake round eyes to the mummies and snakes—the last always a great source of unhappy fascination to her. As usual, there were very few people there, and she had plenty of time to examine at her leisure. Very tired were her

feet when she finally turned her face homewards; and they were still more tired when she got there. She had felt a little lonely again, during her long walk back, and caught herself wishing—only a little though, she stoutly protested inwardly—that she had had some one to talk to as she went along the streets. The more social existence she had led the last few months had drawn her considerably out of the old, self-sufficient inner life she had led in the past. Now, too, that the excitement of her engagement being a good deal faded, once the uncertainty attending it was over, her thoughts went back a good deal to what had happened during the last few days she had spent at Radford.

She thought at first of Mr. Aynard, and the more she did so the more she marvelled at her daring in having thrown away such a chance for her future.

"But I'd do it again," she told herself. "I never could have been his wife when it came to the point. It is all very well to think of such things from a distance: they look very different when they are nearer." And then she thought of Mr. Draycott.

She found her indignation against him had cooled decidedly since she had seen him last. She could bear to think of him without stamping her feet and clenching her hands, with unuttered vows of vengeance on her lips. Nay, she even began to chuckle a little, as she looked back, at her own discomfiture; and felt it would have been a rich treat to have seen her face that afternoon under Chesney Oak.

"I'm sure I looked everything that was of the funniest description—oh dear! oh dear! How dare he? the horrid creature! I declare I almost feel his arm round me now! and how he *did* hug me! To think a man should *live* who has actually *kissed me!*"

And blushing up to her eyes beneath her veil, though she had considerable difficulty in keeping from laughing out as she went along the streets, she hurried homewards to Mrs. Evans.

She had her hands full now, and was very busy all the evening at her preparations; and ever, as she sat at her work, and sent her needle flying in and out, the thought of Mr. Draycott crossed her mind, marvelling what he meant when he said he would follow her to Otago. Was it possible he would do so? If his father died, which he might do any day, he could certainly let the Hall and farm, and go abroad for a few years; in which case, suppose, only suppose that he found out where she was, and came to see her! "And he has assurance enough to dare to do it too, I'm afraid," she concluded with a feeling of thoughtful alarm. "And to think that after all I said to him, he had the audacity to come to Uncle Frank! How he did laugh, to be sure! It was too bad!"

These thoughts were quite amusing to her as she sat alone working in her little sitting-room; and once she laughed fairly aloud, so merrily that good Mrs. Evans came in to see what the joke was. But Joan would only tell her part of it, shaking her head with a comic air of proprietorship as she refused to say more.

She got up next day, feeling very sure that the early post would bring her news from her aunt. The hour came and went, though, and the postman passed the house, inexorably unconscious of the fact that a disappointed inmate expected a letter. After being very busy all the morning, she set off for a nice walk in the afternoon, and went towards the quiet and ever green Regent's Park. The bustle and turmoil of the crowded road; the care-worn, dirty faces of the passers-by, with their shabby clothes, and prematurely old, cunning faces; or the broken-down, dispirited creatures who looked as if they must keep going on—somehow, but who knew that every step they took only conducted them to worse passes than they had ever yet gone through; the stale, used-up air of the thickly peopled streets, had begun to act on Joan's mind as well as her health. Coming, as she had, from the pure, fresh country, the sights and noises of the town had at first amused her somewhat—they were such a contrast to what she had left; but this day, having thought a good deal of her aunt and Radford, she seemed to get a little impatient with the sounds and persons around her, and wished for quiet, and plants and trees to rest her eyes upon.

There are not many places in or near London where you do not see people; not many quiet haunts where you can feel yourself actually alone—where it is pleasant and country-like, that is to say. Oh! the blessedness of solitude when one is fretted past endurance by those one is forced to rub against during one's daily life! Oh! for a lonely heath, or silent coppice! where the sights to be seen would

be the ruddy, bare trunks and thick, dark leafage of the pine, or the prim green foliage of the fragrant spruce fir; and the sounds, the occasional chirp of birds, or the quiet sighing of the wind among the branches; the most irritating looks cast on one only the askant glances of timid rabbits or startled squirrels; and one's most disagreeable companions the flowers and mosses. And what a comforting friend is the calm blue sky! whose little white, fluffy clouds seem to invite one to put aside all thoughts of sadness, and come and sail with them in the pure air; and a feeling that perhaps, after all, in spite of present difficulties, better days will come, arises, and one is both rested and encouraged. Why, if one cannot get these pleasant things, in ever so small a degree, the very thought that they *exist* somewhere is refreshing! And it quiets and consoles a chafed and weary soul to close one's eyes and recal some beautiful, maybe, very far off spot, but once seen, many years ago, perhaps: some turf-covered rock overhanging the blue, wide sea, where the salt breezes seem ever to blow; some fragrant, heath-scented seat on a common; or a sheltered nook, shadowed by tall trees, and carpeted with soft moss.

Joan's mind turned on some such things as these as she went towards the park, until the sight of the great white houses that stand just on its borders looking into it, made her wonder where the town house belonging to the Aynards was; and she recollected it was a long way off, in a street leading from Hyde Park. "Good gracious! just suppose I happened to meet *him*, ever," she thought; and

was glad that she had taken the feather out of the pretty hat her aunt had given her, and that she wore her very quietest dress and jacket. A good deal of rain had fallen the last few days, and the Park was rather wet and withered-looking. Avoiding the grass, she prudently kept to the gravel-walks, and presently came to the Zoological Gardens. She thought she would have dearly enjoyed going in and looking at the animals, but had brought no money out with her, so could not, even if she had not determined to get Mrs. Evans to go with her, when she had time, and when it was bright and sunshiny; for that afternoon was murky and dull. There were not many people about; a few men, of that nondescript kind whose name in London is legion, were passing up and down; some nursemaids and children; and an old man, with his feeble wife leaning on his arm. Joan was a little fatigued, and sat down to rest. She was somewhat out of spirits, too; she was so disappointed at not hearing from Mrs. Essington. Through the trunks of the chestnut trees before her she could see the green fields, where damp, dirty-looking sheep were nibbling industriously away at the grass; and quantities of grey mists were scattered plentifully here and there at no great distance, over hollows or pools of water, and finally melted all the buildings at the other side of the Park into an indistinguishable line of slate-coloured fog.

She had been there for some little time, and was thinking about going, when her attention was attracted by a figure advancing towards the seat where she was: the figure of a young lady in deep,

new mourning, with her face covered by a long crape veil. She seemed either ill or weak, for she came forward very slowly, and wavered a little in her walk; and at last, half to Joan's alarm, she came close up to the wooden bench and stood there, grasping the arm of it tightly, and staring straight before her out of vacant half-closed eyes. The next instant she vacillated, and was just falling forward on the seat, in a position in which it would have been almost impossible to have avoided striking her face against the back, when Joan sprang up and caught her.

She had not quite fainted, for she was one of those to whom total unconsciousness is impossible, but she was very near it. Seeing that she tried to throw back her heavy veil, Joan did it for her, and, when she had done so, stood struck for the moment mute with surprise at her exceeding pallor, and the beauty it was impossible, even with the entire failing of all bright colouring, to disguise. She placed the suffering girl on the bench, and when the fresh air blew across her poor weary face she seemed to recover herself somewhat. Joan heartily wished she had some salts to offer her, but knew perfectly well it was of no use to feel in her pocket for some, for she was not possessed of any. However, she looked around her to see if she could see any lady near who might have some, but there was absolutely no one at all in sight, the bench being a little out of the broad walk that intersects the Park in that direction.

Endeavouring to rouse herself, and to speak her thanks for the assistance given her, the girl lifted

her heavy eyes to the face of her unknown friend, and in doing so, a look of astonishment came into her own, and she started, shaking off the momentary stupor that had come upon her.

"Is it possible?" she said faintly. "Did you recognise me, then?"

"Recognise you! No!" returned Joan, equally surprised; "I am quite a stranger in London. I don't know you at all."

"But, unless I am much mistaken, I know *you*," persisted the other. "Were you not at a school in Wolverton some few years ago? And is not your name Joan—Joan Thornherst?"

"Yes!" exclaimed Joan, startled; "but who are *you?* I don't remember you a bit."

"I am Anne Armour. We were not long together, for you were leaving as we—my sister and I—came."

"Miss Wardlow's at Wolverton! of course I remember you now!" cried Joan, heartily seizing her hand and shaking it warmly; "but you are so altered and grown. You were some years younger than I, and I recollect I looked down on you rather, as one of '*the children*.' But you are most beautiful—no wonder I did not recognise you—and you are so tall!"

"I knew *your* face at once; it looks just as it used to," returned Anne, with a faint smile; "but I am greatly changed, I know; and, oh, Joan! she is just dead—my poor little Ida!—she is just dead! she was only buried the day before yesterday." And Anne burst out into an agony of crying.

Joan was shocked and pained, but not so much startled. From the freshness of her mourning she had suspected some very recent grief. She made no effort to check the other's tears, but sat beside her holding her hand, and giving it a comforting squeeze from time to time, to show her that she was near and felt for her. She, too, had lost *her* little sister, who if she had lived would have been about Anne's own age; and the season of the year, the very locality, the sorrow of her companion, all brought the past so vividly and sadly before her eyes, that before long her own tears were dropping fast in sympathy.

"May is dead too, Anne; she died four years ago," she whispered. "You recollect her? She used to come to school with me sometimes."

Anne looked up, and reading the full participation in a like bereavement in Joan's face, she felt insensibly somewhat consoled. Here was one who had suffered in like manner as she had—who could feel for, and with her.

"There are some people coming," she said, presently, "shall we walk on a little? I'm afraid we both show we have been crying. And now, wont you tell me where you are living? and if you will let me come and see you sometimes? for I am so miserable, Joan!" she continued, as they rose and went slowly towards the centre walk. "I am so wretched! If any one ever wanted a friend, I do. And you look so strong, so *good*—don't laugh at me, I didn't mean to flatter; I was only saying what I felt."

"But I shan't be in England very long; however,

we will be friends while I *am* here," returned Joan, hesitatingly.

"Not be in England! Where are you going, then?"

"It is a long tale to tell," said Joan, hesitating still more; "but you shall hear it some day. You seem in much such a plight as I was four years ago; and as I have passed through it and come out safe, take courage, Anne. It will all come right, whatever it is; only wait."

She had observed her dress, with the made-at-home look she had once known so well herself—that the material was poor and scanty—that the bonnet and veil was of the simplest kind, and that her boots were almost worn out. That pinched, *poor* look in her face, which all its beauty could not conceal, told tales of its own to one who knew of such privations as these were tokens of, and her warm heart went forth in fullest sympathy to her. One must suffer oneself before one can feel for others. How is it possible the rich can divine the sufferings of the poor? If they did, *it is not possible* that they should not help them. The poor fancy they are unfeeling when, in fact, they are only ignorant.

But Joan erred in thinking she could fully sympathize with her old schoolfellow, whose very existence she had long forgotten until she was thus unexpectedly called on by her to recognise her. In all her various trials she had never suffered from having been in love. Her own lot having been destitute of anything of the sort until she went to her aunt's, it had not entered into her head

to suspect Anne had any such troubles. If she had reflected, however, for a moment, she might very reasonably have suspected some perplexities of this kind as well as others; for Anne was so rarely beautiful that it would have been marvellous and almost incredible if she had gone through so many years of her life with as few adventures as Joan, who was far her inferior as to real good looks.

Joan had a good deal to think of as she sat working by herself that evening. Walking homewards with Anne—for their dwellings were not very far apart from each other, and they had gone the greater part of the distance from the Park together—she was told some part of her troubles.

"Poor thing!" thought the former to herself, when they finally parted, with an agreement to see each other on the next day. "Fancy having lived all these years and not having made *one friend*, nearer than an old schoolfellow not seen for years! And four years ago I was just like her. It is not well when one is so poor to live so shut-up in oneself. How can others pity or help you if they know nothing even of your very existence?"

No letter from Mrs. Essington the next morning for Joan, who began to fear she was really very angry with her, and would never have anything more to do with her. She determined to wait one other day, and then, if nothing came, to write again.

Anne came in the afternoon. She found Joan very busy, and offered to help her, feeling anything to be a relief that took her from herself. And while they cut out and sewed they talked, and pre-

sently Mrs. Evans brought the tea in. Joan made a very pleasant little hostess, and petted and took care of her guest so nicely and cordially, that poor, broken-spirited Anne began to cheer up and smile again. She looked so fair and beautiful in her deep mourning dress that the other could scarcely keep her eyes off her; the red firelight playing on her pale face and lighting up her golden hair as she and Joan sat talking on the rug beside it, while the candles stood unlighted on the table. The room was a little, low-ceiled, nearly square one; the paper on the walls darkened by years of London smoke and flies; the furniture scanty and poor. At either side of the fireplace were two little dark cupboards fitting into the recesses, on the tops of which stood numbers of bright tumblers and cheap ornaments; Mrs. Evans's hand being visible in the cleanliness and neatness of everything around. This little parlour and the bedroom occupied by Joan she let when she was able, she and her husband inhabiting the kitchen. Small and poor as the apartment was, however, it presented no bad background in the twilight (with a small fire, as it was cold, blazing in the little bright grate), for the two girls who were talking together in low tones on the hearth-rug.

Anne's heart was opened by the unexpectedness of the *rencontre*, and the kindness with which Joan had so unquestioningly received her into her temporary home, and she spoke very freely and fully; a good deal of Julian, somewhat of Mr. Alcott, but most of all concerning her dead sister and her home. And Joan listened attentively and feelingly. It was such an unutterable relief for the first to pour

out all her perplexities and speak of her sorrows, that once started on the topics she found no lack of words. Mrs. Alcott was very good to her, but somehow she never felt quite at her ease with her. She was old, too, and not of her caste; and besides, she was George's mother. And then Anne ever felt a kind of remorse on her for the part she was playing; she felt how poor and unloyal was the heart he fancied he had won, and she knew she was unworthy of him. So she talked chiefly of her home, of all the privations and sorrows following Julian's departure.

"And then came the time of pawning and selling things—books, clocks, unmade dresses, and such like," Anne whispered to Joan, with that certainty of sympathy that only experience of similar circumstances can give. "The stealing out of the house when it became darkish, with our poorest clothes on, and thick veils, and old cotton gloves to hide our hands. Mamma and papa and Julia had done it, and then I had to take my turn! I'd have gone in open daylight, in the most conspicuous places, rather than have let Ida do so—she, so young, so impressionable! to stamp her with a shame that would never, could never be forgotten—to shock her with the revolting and at the same time pathetically commonplace realism of being so roughly set face to face with poverty in one of its most degrading forms. I should have been ashamed of myself had I been able to see her do it—I, so much older than she was! However, mamma never seemed to think of anything of the sort as regarded *me*, nor Julia either. No; *they* had done such things

—why should not I do so also? Do you remember what Trollope says in one of his books about a lady who was not very feminine or delicate in her ways of thinking or speaking on some things, but at the same time singularly generous and almost chivalrous in her ideas as to others? 'That she would have made a perfect gentleman.' I have had occasion to observe the very exact contrary concerning mamma and my sister Julia. And yet why should I so rail at them? They are not worse, I dare say, than many others; only, as I have had so much to do with them (which I dare say they consider quite as great a misfortune on their part as I do on mine), their disagreeable qualities are brought so very near to me. I tell you that the first time or two I felt it very keenly: the shame of it—the dread of being hereafter recognised by some one who had either seen me go in or out of the shop. A strange thing, too, happened to me once when on one of these important errands. Is it not strange how, in the most miserable incidents of our lives, there will sometimes mingle a strain of comicality that forces one to a laugh, though it is one pretty sure to end in tears? Just as when one is very happy there is often a sort of undercurrent of sadness—a discord vibrating through the loveliest music. As I was stepping out of a shop where I had *left*, as the poor people call it, a silk dress, a young man, looking like a clerk, or something of that sort, with a pleasant, boyish face and fair hair, met me, coming from the opposite direction; and in a low but perfectly audible tone, wholly significant, and half mischievous, said, 'Oh!' and passed quickly on. He

said it with such a mocking emphasis, and glancing so amusedly at my thick veil, that I fairly had a quiet little laugh to myself after I had recovered from the start he had given me. Just imagine! for an instant I fancied it might be some one who had seen me with Julian, and recognised me. Yet I felt convinced afterwards it was impossible, for I had a perfectly impenetrable veil on. But wasn't it a queer thing to happen?"

"Very queer," said Joan, uncertain whether to laugh or cry, and seeing parts of her own old life rise up before her, called up from the past, so that she might live them again, in the story of her schoolfellow.

"*How* I thanked heaven that he — Julian, I mean—was gone! that we were absolutely friendless! It had come to that at last—to be thankful for our worst misfortunes! Let us hope that Fate or Providence, or whatever it is that sends children to people who can't afford to keep them, was satisfied. Do you know, what with taking lodgers and going about to pawnshops, and living without any kind of a servant, and being obliged to take all the household food in at the front door ourselves (don't they seem mean and childish—all these little troubles?), I don't think I cared very much at last *what* I did. With very little pressure I could have sold matches and combs in the streets with a decent composure, or gone into public-houses, playing on an accordion and collecting half-pence from the tipsy navvies there; for, one way or another, it was imperative at last to obtain money, seeing no one would trust us any longer.

"I was getting quite used to it all, at last. God certainly (if it was God who sent all these petty trials) broke my pride well, and very nearly destroyed all self-respect (a pretty kind of self-respect, you'll say, that could be injured by such trifles—that is, you might say or think so if you had not experienced much the same sort of thing yourself—I see it in your eyes). And I consider it was a very risky thing for Him to do, if He wanted to make me 'good,' in the way most people who are esteemed 'good' are so. When pride and self-respect are gone, in a character such as mine was at that time, two of the best and strongest guardians from all things hurtful, are gone too. But I am prosing instead of going on with what I have to tell. Yes, Joan; as I say, I became stolid to and almost jocular, at last, over my evening excursions; for when I had been once or twice I generally went afterwards, 'there being no use in the whole household degrading themselves,' as dear Julia sweepingly remarked, when from some observation I made once, I allowed it to be seen that I by no means relished my missions to 'our uncle's,' as mamma with her detestable vivacity playfully termed the pawnbroker's. How some people *hate* others for what seems to lookers-on very paltry and inefficient reasons! *How* I disliked mamma and Julia, I cannot tell you: about that time, my distaste for them became a perfect antipathy. When I used to come sneaking—yes, that is the word—sneaking in from the dusky streets, and go into the lamplit dining-room, I would see those women sitting by the table, their calm faces animated perhaps over some

religious or political intelligence. Papa would probably be in his old easy-chair, with his magnificent head thrown somewhat back, and a half-fretted, half-serious look on his finely-cut features (as if he inly thought his womenkind were noisily troublesome over things they could not understand), reading one of his few remaining books—I having probably gone out with some rare old volume and returned without it, but with money. By-the-bye (I can't help digressing, you see), how very handsome papa is, Joan! Except Julian, I think, as to his head especially, he is the very handsomest man I ever saw. Sometimes, when pleased, and his face lights up, accustomed though people grow to beauty when they live in the house with it, I am struck with a veritable awe by his appearance. You could fancy him a king, so dignified and so animated is his expression. Certainly, if it is one of the most useless of God's gifts, it is the one to be most coveted of all, excepting health." Joan smiled a little at the enthusiasm of the beautiful creature beside her for the very quality for which she herself was so remarkable; and her hands pressed those of her old schoolmate, as she looked into her eyes with the hearty, frank admiration any one not jealous must have felt towards so lovely a specimen of human nature. "Mamma and Julia would be embroidering, perhaps—or one of them working and the other reading the newspaper; while exclamations like these would be shooting about in the air—'There mamma! didn't I tell you how it would be? Lord P—— has done this or that;' or, 'I see Mr. W—— has made another speech against the Roman

Catholics;' or, 'There is a new book come out, by D——. How I should like to read it! Do buy it, papa, for us! It is only four guineas!' And then papa would fidget silently in his chair, taking no other notice of their address; then the two would *laugh!*—oh, *how* they would laugh! and I would put the money and ticket down on the table, feeling perfectly sick at what I looked upon as their untimed and most foolish frivolity. Then it would be—'Oh, here is Anne at last; and looking for all the world about as ill-tempered as she can possibly be.' And mamma would say, with a gentle sneer, 'Are you cold, Anne? You had better come to the fire and warm yourself; for I know you make yourself almost ill with your tempers, if you are at all uncomfortable.' And perhaps papa would lower his book, and eye me whimsically and good-humouredly over the top of it. 'Is that true, Anne, that you indulge in bad tempers if you are cold? I am very sorry to hear it: you ought to have more sense than that, my dear.' And I, like a fool—an idiot—any strong term you like—would feel very much inclined to burst out crying, especially when, having reddened under the first attack, it was all I could do to avoid telling my amiable lady relatives to mind their own business. I remember, however, the tactics I generally followed were to go out of the room, and either stroll into the kitchen or upstairs. Ida would be in the former, sitting beside the few cinders that were called a fire, talking in quiet whispers with an old woman who used to come to wash for us; and usually came in once or twice a week besides,

for an hour or two in the evening, to clean the place somewhat. Ida and she became great friends in a short time; and to see them, the one so old and wrinkled and brown and careworn, and the other so young and pale and slender, with a serious face and earnest melancholy eyes, would remind me of some strange German fairy tale, as the two crouched over the grate in the gloom that was only lit by the remains of the fire and a thin tallow candle, no other lights being allowed, as they were too expensive. It was a whiff of the outside world for the poor child—it was some little change from the unvarying dulness of home monotony. The old woman would tell her tales of her neighbours; how one was sick, and another getting well: how one had work, and another had not any for so long, that she was afraid they must go to the workhouse after all. Then would come stories of robbers and murders; death-tokens, signs, and ghost stories. And then, in her turn, Ida would do what she could, if not to amuse, then to benefit the old woman, who, poor creature, had been once very well off, in her rank of life; had had a little shop of her own, a husband and children. But now these were all gone from her, and she was left solitary and poor; and, except her "chapel" on Sunday evening, she had neither time nor heart to trouble herself much with religion. So sometimes my poor young sister—with a vague idea, I suppose, of converting the willing old creature, who would sit mumbling at a crust of bread and drink of weak ale that was called her supper, and nod piously at intervals and ejaculate, 'That's true!'—would

read a chapter, or part of one, in the Bible to her, and make a timid little comment or so, as she went on, of her own, to the complacent, though at times (owing to a hard day's work) rather sleepy listener; who, nevertheless, I am sure, generally did her best to attend to what she was conscious was intended to do her 'good,' by that 'blessed child,' as she afterwards called Ida to me. But if *I* came in to join them, the low, serious voice would die away, and quietly and unobtrusively the book would be closed; for my sister would divine, as if by instinct, how very, very far from unison with me all such readings would be. Then, with a little patient sigh, she would turn and look at me silently, to see by my face if there were anything fresh to be told her, after old Betty's departure, of either good or bad news. Or if I went upstairs by myself to my room (which I think I told you was a front one), after taking off my bonnet and throwing it on the bed, I would go to the window and look out to amuse and quiet myself. We had a lamp exactly opposite the house on our side of the way, and another on the other one, only a little distance down the street; so, when it was a tolerably clear night, I could see all that came or went past. How well I can remember it, and yet it seems so long ago! I almost feel the cold window-glass that I pressed my cheek against in interested speculation as to whether the postman was coming to our house or not, or as to the conduct of a pair of sweethearts—whom I used to envy with all my heart. And then the solemn waddle of the solitary police-man, as he stalked slowly past, was entertaining to

me (I do believe I should have ended by becoming quite imbecile, Joan, if that state of things had gone on for very long), as the lamplights shone on his oil-skin cape and showed the white bands on his coat-sleeves. And I used to long for him to spring a rattle, or capture a thief, or discover a fire; in fact, *anything* for me to look at. Calm and quiet are all very well, you know, but no one likes the breathless hush and stillness that comes before a storm bursts. One longs for anything to happen to prevent you from 'suffering a thousand deaths by dreading one.'

"Well, I can tell you I got cured one way and another of my 'tempers' about that time; but the cure left me a very devil. It was the often-quoted parable about the house swept and garnished, in the Bible, you know: for the one who was expelled seven more entered, all worse than the first. After all, passionate people are not the worst people in the world, mark that! They are inconvenient, vulgar, and noisy, and are apt to do startling things; but for a really concentratedly wicked person, commend me to one who has thorough control over a strong temper! I have never had so little real self-respect and esteem for myself, internally, as I have had since I began *the credit system* with my enemies. When debts are not paid, one must charge interest for them, you know; and, of course, the larger the debt the greater the interest. Papa, I shall always be glad to see and to help as far as I can, when I am married; but neither mamma nor Julia shall ever enter a house of which I am mistress of, that I am quite determined.

If they endeavour to thrust themselves upon me, (for, to do them justice, I believe their impudence is fully capable of it), I shall surely tell them to walk out again, and, if they refuse, as of course they will, then I shall have them turned out by the servants; or if that be too much of an *exposé*, I shall instantly leave the house until they are out of it. The time is gone past for half measures with them.

"But I must go on and tell you how she died."

Which she did, until the girls were both sobbing audibly.

"And when at last she was gone, when I looked on her pale waxen face, so pure, so stern, so calm, so free *at last* from pain—a freedom bought by death—I felt neither fear nor sickening; only an unutterable awe and peace. Something seemed to tell me to draw aside the lowered window-blind and look out, for there was a kind of brightness in the sky that penetrated even into the dulled and darkened room; and I knew it must be too early for sunrise—the sun my sister was never more to see. Looking up from the bed of death, I saw directly before me, set in vivid blue, the glittering morning star—the grey masses of night-clouds gathering round that brightest spot of heaven's colouring, and advancing slowly to hide even that small glimpse of a distant paradise. I wondered if Ida were already high up in the sky, near the star that shone so softly and clearly; if she were happy as she went her way, as we fancy people who have just died do, almost unconsciously, and casting no lingering look back on earth; and if those black clouds

I saw were foreshadowings of others blacker still, that hurried on towards her to engulf her for ever in their eternal shades? Were there still other, last dangers to fear, even after the soul had left her earthly body? powers that might be at work to prevent her entering the gates of heaven? Thinking thus, I looked down again on the fair hair surrounding the young, unformed features of my sister; the dark lashes lying motionless for ever on her cold, white cheeks; the thin hands lying quietly in all their pathetic helplessness at her side; and thought—whatever her future beyond the grave may be, her fate *here* is for ever fixed and immutable. Such as it had been, could never now be altered; her years of sadness could never be atoned for by years of joy. She had worked and not been paid—sowed and not reaped—suffered and not rejoiced. Would God be kind and merciful to her, now that——?

"Money came—oh, of course! when it had ceased to be required for *her*—when it was too late. The letters to our different relatives had not been believed in before, when they were told that she was dying—partly of want, which a little taken from their superfluities could have relieved. Can I blame them much when I know that they had been often applied to with exaggerated accounts of the needs there was scarcely anything to supply? so that they had come to disbelieve *all* that they had heard, and ceased to give either sympathy or help. I had grown up to dislike and distrust the possessors of wealth that were of our family. I believed all my elders spoke the truth—*when I was young*, Joan

—I am wiser now; and when they generously sent assistance, on hearing of Ida's death, I felt even my right to hate them was taken away. How is it possible I can be anything that is good, coming from the family I belong to? I *must* be dishonourable and cowardly—dishonest and greedy—mercenary and false." And Anne burst again into tears of bitter shame and pain.

Joan sat silent and pitying.

"Julian will be fortunate in having lost me," continued the other, lifting her head as she choked back her tears. "Only that he was the best—the most generous of men, he would never have seen anything in me to like—except my face. And now I can never look at him again; another has kissed the lips he thought were his only—another has held me in his arms, and spoken to me as his promised wife! Oh, my love—my love! I never knew how much I cared for you until I wrote that last letter, and felt George Alcott's arm round me in the place where yours had been! I thought I could give you up and take another as my betrothed, because he was rich and could give my sister presents to please and do her good—and I cannot, I cannot! Oh, Joan! you don't understand me when I talk like this —you have never cared for any one as I have cared for him. You think I am exaggerating an imaginary evil into a real one; but I am not."

CHAPTER VIII.

NEWS FROM RADFORD.

LETTERS for you, Miss Joan," said Mrs. Evans, knocking at the door of her room while she was still asleep the next morning; and, awakened by the noise from a queer, mixed-up kind of dream, she jumped eagerly out of bed, and picked up the missives that had been pushed under her door. One from her aunt, and another from her sister Clara.

It was time for her to get up, so she deferred the reading of them a few minutes while she made her hasty toilet; but before she had half finished, the temptation had become so strong, that she yielded to it; and fairly sat down before the looking-glass with her brush in her hand, and Mrs. Essington's letter opened and lying spread out on the table before her.

She had not read many lines before she started, and dropped her brush with a bang on the ground, giving all her attention to the news it contained, which was, indeed, of so startling a character that she re-read the pages more than once before she could get them quite into her head.

The old Squire was dead; he had had a third stroke the very day Joan left Radford, and in a few hours breathed his last. But what followed was of still greater importance.

"I can hardly understand it clearly myself as yet," wrote Mrs. Essington, "but from what I can learn, the facts are these: Do you remember seeing a carriage with a man and a woman in it drive past us, while I stopped to speak with Baldwin Draycott beside the gates of the old lodge? Well, those persons went on to the Hall, and just as Baldwin walked in at the door of the house, they were shown into his father's study — contrary to all orders, as you well know the poor Squire never saw strangers. We suppose the servant who admitted them was bribed to do it—old John would never have done so; but it was the housemaid who admitted them, chancing to be passing through the hall at the time the bell rang. Baldwin heard voices and went to the study, and then he saw his poor father lying senseless on the floor, with the strangers bending over him, trying to lift him up. There was great confusion, as you may imagine; and in the midst of it all, the new comers, whose sudden presence had virtually caused the old man's death, refused to leave the house until they—oh, Joan! I can scarcely believe the truth of what I am writing even now—it seems so horrible, so strange—until they were acknowledged as the true master and mistress there. In plain words, that woman is the real, *first* wife of old Mr. Draycott! He married her, when very young, in Scotland; and the man we saw is their lawful son, actually. She was supposed to be dead—her name was published in a list of names of some passengers who were wrecked in a ship going to Australia, as drowned; and, having settled out there, only re-

turning a short while ago, the report was never contradicted, as it happened.

"You see what follows. The children of the second Mrs. Draycott (or rather the first Mrs. *Draycott*, as, when she married Mr. Legh, he took her name, thus sinking his own), must of course be illegitimate. Geoffrey and Stephen died, unconscious of this terrible fact which is just come to light; but poor Baldwin—oh, Joan, my very heart bleeds for him! Hard as you are to him, I think you will reproach yourself somewhat for your behaviour. And yet perhaps, after all, it is for the best; however, I can scarcely say that either, for what will become of you, and where you will go, you wretched, headstrong girl! no one can tell. Don't think I am cruel in writing like this to you, but I can't prevent myself. I really got to love you, Joan; and you should go and repay us as you have!

"I can tell you little more as yet. Frank says affairs will not be much altered for Baldwin—that is one comfort—when all comes to be settled. The old Squire was almost penniless when Emily Draycott, the beautiful heiress, married him; and therefore what property there remains will go to her son—the remaining son—Baldwin: so Frank thinks, at all events. But until the funeral is over, and the will read, nothing will be known for certain. The lawyer belonging to—Mr. Legh, I suppose we must call the eldest son (for there is not the faintest idea of either denying or disputing the fact that the marriage was a perfectly lawful though a private one), has been at Lymestone twice already to see Mr. Morgan, the Draycotts' lawyer; but we know

nothing definite as yet. We have not seen Baldwin since—that is, I have not. Frank went up to the Hall yesterday, and says he takes things very coolly and composedly.

"October 4th.—I left off writing last evening, for I was interrupted; and must finish now. Baldwin just then walked in and sat down by me. When I turned to look at him he was very pale, and seemed agitated. Pointing to the letter before me, he said, 'Are you writing to tell *her?*' And I knew of course he meant *you*. Poor fellow! Do you know, I laid my hands on his shoulders and kissed him, exactly as if he had been my own child; and for a moment he also seemed as if he were going to put his head on my neck and cry like a boy. But he didn't, though; *I* did nearly all the time he was with me. It was very foolish, and very unlike me, too, but I couldn't help myself. He was very gentle and tender—more like the Baldwin I knew years ago than I have ever seen him since he came home this last time. He told me he had found this out, some time ago, in looking over his father's papers; it was in a letter received from an old friend who lives near Langholm, in Dumfriesshire, in which he mentioned that the cousin of one of his old tenants was thinking of coming back from Australia with her son; and great astonishment had been caused on the receipt of the news announcing this fact, as this cousin had been long supposed to have been drowned on her way out, nearly thirty years ago, at a time when very few people went to settle in New Holland. It was this which had caused the second paralytic attack; and when he

recovered from that, Baldwin knew all. His unconnected mutterings in his sleep, and a few memoranda, among other things the list of the drowned passengers in the *Atlas*, with one name deeply marked round by ink (the name of the woman he had married the year before, and who had consented to accompany her father, who wished to join his daughter and her husband out there—prosperous settlers in Adelaide—believing him to be dead), all served as so many links to connect the miserable story together. And it was this knowledge which made him so morose and so indifferent—so utterly unlike the bright, good-tempered lad I remembered before he went to sea. Do you recollect the old Squire's agitation that time in the garden, which mystified us so? and do you remember Baldwin saying (but that, *of course*, you do) that he would follow you wherever you went? He can do so if he likes, so—but I really have not the heart to joke now. He is going to let Draycott, the Hall, and farm together, to some one who will put the whole place in thorough repair; and go away from England himself for a long time. So we shall lose him too, as well as you! If it had been settled that you should both go together, it would not be so bad.

"But I must finish, or you will wonder why I do not write to you. The funeral is to be to-morrow. Mr. Legh wishes to take his place among the mourners, at the head of them, as the eldest son; but this Baldwin will not allow. I much fear some disturbance; but Frank says both lawyers will be there, as well as several relatives

and friends (Mr. George Legh, the old Squire's brother, among the number), so nothing very bad can happen, one would think. But Baldwin has been fearfully tried, and his temper both soured and disappointed by his foreknowledge of what has happened. I shall be very nervous until it is well over. Will write to you again. Love from your uncle (though he declares still he will never quite forgive you), and myself, and believe me, your affectionate aunt,

"ELLEN ESSINGTON."

Joan had a good deal to think of, as one may imagine, while she finished dressing and ate her breakfast. Her sister's letter she looked upon as not of much importance after her aunt's, although it contained a good deal of what was interesting, besides a note enclosed from her father. He wrote, telling her that as far as he was concerned, she was of course at perfect liberty to do as she liked about emigrating; that he very strongly advised her to do nothing of the sort, however, but to stay in England, and do the best she could, like her sisters. They could share and share alike as long as he lived, and when he died, something could be arranged for her, he dared say. He concluded by saying she had better tell the lady who had engaged her that her friends disapproved of her going, and get off the bargain in the best way she could; and if she were tired of being with Mrs. Essington, she could come and join him and her sisters in France. Clara's letter was much to the same effect, only contained some surprise at her having mentioned

nothing about Mr. Aynard or Mr. Draycott when she had written to her. Was it possible that one or both had proposed, and she had been so wild as to refuse them? And was that why she had quarrelled with her aunt?"

Joan smiled over this last letter, as she saw her sister had (with the sharpness peculiar to her, for all the Thornhersts were very quick at putting two and two together), divined pretty exactly how the case stood. She went steadily on with her preparations, however, having thought too long and too seriously on her plan to be disconcerted concerning it by any winds that could blow, she told herself.

During the day she thought a good deal of Baldwin Draycott, and was very sorry for him. Still she did not like the idea that he was really free to go abroad, and might perhaps be in the same ship with her all the way to New Zealand. This was to be avoided by every means in her power. "I wont take my passage until the very last," she thought, "and then I'll ask to see the names of the passengers, and of course if *he* is there, will not go in that ship. Poor fellow, though! I am really very sorry for him! How I wonder what auntie's next letter will tell me!"

Anne came in the afternoon, and in the course of their conversation another important fact came out. The Mr. Alcott she was engaged to and the old Squire's eldest son was the same person! What a strange coincidence! "He was away in the country somewhere, on very important business," Anne told Joan, innocently (little thinking the person she was talking to knew far better than she did herself on

what business), or she could not have been able to come to see her so frequently, she feared.

"I have been wishing ever since I met you, Joan, that I was going instead of you," she said, while she and Joan sat at work together. "I don't think I can bear poor George much longer, though he is so very good: and I could not stop at home if I broke off with *him*. That would be the *second*. You don't know what it is to be engaged to one man while you like another."

"I've never been engaged at all, or in love either," said Joan, smiling; for, truth to tell, she was a little bit incredulous, and inclined to jest on woes she could have but very little idea of.

"Don't laugh at me, Joan. You wouldn't if you knew all I suffer in thinking I shall have to pass my life with that man, if I don't do something soon which will stop the engagement. Marriage doesn't end at the church-door, unluckily. If I only had the courage, Joan—if I only had the courage!" the poor creature went on, after a pause, with the bitter tears standing in her eyes. "Oh, what would I give if I could but make up my mind to go away like you! and then I should be rid of all my troubles at once. Every time I see him, I say to myself that I cannot, never shall be able to marry this Mr. Alcott; and, as I have written to Julian, telling him all about it, I can never expect to see *him* again, either. But even if I did, I could never dare to look him in the face after what I have been mean and base enough to do. Oh, can't you help me—decide for me, dear? Can't you suggest any way for me out of this quagmire of doubt?"

"Well, no—I can't," replied Joan, hesitatingly, and looking undecidedly at the fair, worried, pained face that was turned to her so imploringly; and if the sight had not been a mollifying one, in its beauty and trouble, her tones would have been rather stern ones. Decided herself, she could scarcely comprehend indecision in others, especially on such important points.

"Do—*do!* You must! I can't resolve about anything. I seem to have lost all power of self-dependence—I am weaker than the veriest straw."

"But what puzzles me is this, Anne; you say you like Mr. Alcott very well, but cannot resolve, by marrying him, to shut yourself out from all chances of the other. Now, when you love one person, how is it possible for you to like, or even tolerate at all any other one—in the light of a future husband, of course, I mean?"

"Don't despise me, Joan—though I feel you must be inclined to do so. Julian was the first who ever seemed to care for me, and I liked him very much, even though I had always before only thought of marriage as an easy way of being rich. But I had no idea of *how* much I loved him, until I wrote to tell him I was engaged to some one else."

"What! then you have really done it? You have broken off with the one you liked, and promised to marry some one you don't care for?"

"You know, he was so good to *her*. I couldn't help myself, Joan; and then he is well-off, and I like riches, and hate poverty," said Anne, remonstratingly.

"You actually engaged yourself to one person

while you were still the promised wife of another! Dear, dear!" said Joan, innocently, her mind turning to her own affairs for a moment. "I should no more have dared—— Well, you have got yourself into a pretty situation, young woman! The only thing I see you had better do is to break the *second* promise you have made, as you did the first. I suppose it wouldn't be considered honourable not to hold to one's given word, whatever one suffered; but if you ask *me*, I must say I don't believe in keeping rash vows, like Jephtha. You'd better tell Mr. Alcott the next time you see him how the case stands; and if he is a good man, as you say he is, he will release you from your engagement at once. No one would care to marry a girl who tells him to his face she likes some one else a great deal better, unless under very exceptional circumstances."

"How dare I?" said Anne. "I couldn't do it, Joan—I must write to him."

"Very well then—write," said Joan, a little impatiently. "Good heavens, Anne! have you lived as long as you have, and gone through as many trials, and not yet come to the wise resolution of never making yourself miserable in any way, for anything? We have miseries enough sent us; don't let us make any more for ourselves. You should try to keep clear of such affairs, as I do." And Miss Joan plumed herself, complacently.

She had never spoken a word of either Mr. Aynard or Baldwin Draycott that had reference to their propositions of marriage. She was unusually reserved on all such subjects when they became real: she hid them far away, deep in her own

heart, and smiled inwardly over the consciousness of having such concealed treasures.

Anne looked up at her and smiled significantly.

"I have told you a good deal, Joan, but I can only suspect about *your* affairs."

Two days after Mrs. Essington's first letter the second came. The funeral had passed over very quietly, although Mr. Alcott was there. Affairs would not be settled for some time, but were all in the hands of the two lawyers. Meanwhile, a farm-bailiff was engaged, the house-servants discharged, and the Hall left in charge of Mrs. Pain. It was to be let at the first opportunity; Baldwin Draycott was in London. He could not go abroad at once, it seemed; but intended doing so as soon as it was possible.

"And, in heaven's name, Joan, if you have any heart at all, be kind and goodnatured to him if you should see him: I don't know that you may—still there is the chance. But don't flatter yourself he is dying of love for *you*, for he is doing nothing of the sort; he is a great deal too busy. Besides, he will not be here long, as he leaves England as soon as he can. If you take my advice you will appear to ignore your celebrated conversation with him in the park that day, and speak to him as if it had never occurred. But I know you are too good-hearted not to be nice to him, Joan—that is, if you see him. Of course there is no chance of his calling on you, wherever you have stowed yourself to. I wrote to Mrs. Miles yesterday, answering for your family, &c.; but I hope with all my heart she will have nothing to say to you. Mr. Aynard is in

Scotland. He never and Sir Thomas are still at Lynton Park. Oh, Joan! how *could* you throw away such a chance? But there is no use in talking. You are simply incorrigible."

The next day, however, Joan saw him. She had gone to the Regent's Park to meet Anne Armour, who had said she would be there if she possibly could; but she could not see her anywhere, and was walking along among the trees, near the spot they first met, in a rather discontented frame of mind, when she suddenly came upon him. She gave such a start when she caught sight of his figure that she was glad there chanced to be no one near to observe her, excepting three or four children chasing each other merrily round the trunks of the neighbouring trees. It was a bright October day; through the bare branches the sun shone warmly in a blue sky, and the russet-tinted leaves rustled crackling on the ground as she walked over them.

She had a good mind to pass behind him very quietly, and not speak at all: she did not think he would observe her, as he was sitting leaning forward, drawing figures with his cane on the ground. His eyes were bent down, and he was looking much as usual, excepting a little graver and sterner. While she was hesitating he raised his head suddenly, and their eyes met.

The change that passed over his face was so sudden and bright, that Joan felt her eyes fill with tears as he rose and came quickly to her, holding out his hand as usual. She gave him hers, heartily

and freely, though she looked down to prevent his observing how much affected she was. Somehow, young people can scarcely be intimate with each other for nearly a year, in the same degree he and she had been, without a strong feeling of some kind springing up between them or being ready to do so, when occasion calls it forth.

"So we have met," he said.

"Yes. I live quite close here," she answered, a little confused—wishing to speak as usual, but not knowing what to say. Indeed, the suddenness and unexpectedness of the meeting had put to flight most of her ideas.

"Shall we walk in this direction?" she added.

"If you like."

And they went on in silence for a time. Joan was still thinking of that look on his face when he lifted his eyes and saw her. Nothing in their previous intercourse had ever really touched her as that had done, or carried such sure conviction into her soul that he certainly loved her, as that one involuntary flash of the eyes and lighting up of his noble countenance. It is true it had gone almost as soon as it had come; but she had seen it, and that was sufficient. He had offered her his arm, and she took it as simply as if they had never quarrelled *à l'outrance* beneath Chesney Oak, scarcely a fortnight before.

"You have heard from your aunt?" he said.

"Yes."

"And you know everything that has occurred?"

"I suppose I do," hesitating and awkward, wish-

ing to show the sympathy she felt, but not knowing how to do it.

"You never knew—never guessed at anything before?"

"No; how could I?" surprised.

"I have thought since—since I saw you last—that you might have had some reason for being so angry with me that day——"

What answer Joan made to this she could never exactly recollect, it was so very incoherent—anything to check all allusion to that afternoon under Chesney Oak. But she denied as strongly as she could her having even the very faintest idea of the real truth. "She had wondered once or twice, she acknowledged, if there was some mystery or other as to Australia, but nothing more — nothing, she could assure him." And here she was seized with a fit of coughing that made her quite scarlet in the face, and compelled her to stop for want of breath.

"Why, what a terrible cold you have!" he remarked.

"Yes. It has been hanging about me the last two or three days. I don't know if I ought to go out with it, but I feel so choked in the house."

He looked hard at her. "Take care of yourself," he said then. "You have not your aunt with you now."

"No," said Joan, feeling a little uncomfortable, at a suffocating kind of sensation in her throat and chest. "Oh, I shall soon get better, no doubt. My colds never last long."

Then he began to talk with her concerning her

voyage; and she told him all about it. "Had she taken her passage yet?" he asked.

"No; she meant to see about that to-morrow. There was a great difference in ships, they told her."

"Would she let him accompany her when she went? He knew a good deal of such business."

"Of course it is all nonsense about his going too," rapidly decided Joan, feeling repentant she had ever given the idea house-room. And then she spoke boldly—

"Yes; and she should be much obliged to him."

Not much more was said, and nothing at all that bore any reference to anything of the past. That scene in Draycott Park might have been a dream, for all allusion to it made by either. Joan felt very much at her ease with him too—far more so than she had ever hoped to do again; and let him see her home without any demur. The evening had closed in early, however, and the air was raw and damp. She coughed very badly once or twice again before she reached Mrs. Evans's. Appointing an hour for to-morrow to go with him to the City, they said good-bye, and parted.

Mrs. Evans scolded her vigorously about having stayed out so late, and Joan replied that she could not help it—she had met some one, and had been delayed; the fact being, she was so busy talking and listening to Mr. Draycott that she had not observed the twilight falling and that the hour was getting late, until she saw the twinkling lamps in the streets as she was coming home.

"Why, your cough is just awful!" said the good

woman. "You must have some gruel and go to bed early, Miss Joan. I don't say as a mustard plaster wouldn't do you good, too, your breathing is so bad."

"I hate gruel, Hannah; and I wont have anything to do with mustard," she answered, laughing; but the laugh ended in another cough. "I'll have my tea very hot, and make up a good fire; and if I'm not better to-morrow, I'll buy some cough lozenges. It is only a bad cold."

She had a disagreeable evening, however. She was feeling really ill when at last, finding the words in her German Grammar all swim before her eyes, she gave up the attempt to learn a little, and sat by her solitary fire, thinking. She was melancholy and even uneasy. What if she should never go this voyage after all? what if she should die? No one would be very sorry, she thought, except Mrs. Evans. Would Baldwin think of her more than a day or two, perhaps? No; he would go away and forget her altogether. She was beginning to feel very lonely. She wished Anne Armour had come to see her that afternoon, and then she would not have gone out and increased her cold so. What had kept her away? Had she a bad cold too?

"Oh, I hope I am not going to be ill," she thought, as, her head aching dreadfully, and her eyes hardly able to see anything, she finally resolved upon giving up all pretence at occupation, and going off to bed. "What will become of me? Hannah has no time to see after me. I am not at all well to-night. But perhaps I shall sleep it off."

CHAPTER IX.

JOAN IS ILL.

WHEN Mr. Draycott presented himself the next morning at Mrs. Evans's door, it was opened by that good woman with a face of some anxiety and care.

"Oh, sir! poor Miss Joan! she is so ill! She can hardly lift her head up. Will you please to step in here—in my kitchen if you don't mind, sir? for I want to speak with you a minute."

Mr. Draycott followed her in, looking both startled and shocked. "What is the matter with her?" he said.

"She's took a dreadful cold, somehow. She told me she had hardly any sleep all night, and this morning she seems quite light-headed like. She wanted to get up and pack her trunks a few minutes ago, to go to her aunt she said.

"A cold? but she would not be light-headed with a mere cold, would she? Have you sent for a doctor?" asked Mr. Draycott, evidently very uneasy and perplexed.

"I wanted to, but she says no: better wait a bit. Her breathing is very heavy and she's burning with fever. I thought I'd tell you, sir, as you know that lady's direction. She ought to know if she gets worse—and I believe she will, before she is better;

for her pa, and her sisters are in France, and she is here all alone if it weren't for me."

"You had better have a doctor first and see what he says. Mrs. Essington shall be telegraphed to at once, if it is likely to prove serious. Can I see her?"

"She's not up, sir. I persuaded her to stop in bed; but she told me she expected you to call, and I was to say she was very sorry, but she can't go to the City to-day."

"I should think not. Give her this and I'll wait for an answer." And taking out his pocket-book, Mr. Draycott wrote a few lines with his pencil on a card, and handed it to Mrs. Evans.

"Certainly, sir. Perhaps you'd step into the parlour for a moment, for I hear her calling, so she's not asleep. I was afraid our voices would disturb her if we went in there at first." And marshalling him into Joan's little sitting-room, she closed the door on him and went up stairs.

Mr. Draycott listened to her heavy footsteps mount the stairs and cross the room over his head; and then gave a glance around him. In one corner stood a big black trunk—Joan's last purchase—with "Otago" written on it in square white printed letters; and on the table was her little work-case, that he knew so well by sight, having often seen it in her aunt's drawing-room. On the chimney piece was her German Grammar, which she had left there when she gave up the attempt at learning a little last night, and a bit of Mrs. Essington's last letter, could be seen sticking out at one end of the leaves, where it had been put as marker.

Mrs. Evans came hurrying down in a few minutes. "Tell him he is very good, but I'd rather no one knew I am ill. I shall be quite well to-morrow, no doubt." Them's her very words, sir, as near as I can remember them. She says she'll have a doctor, if she is not better this afternoon, but was very angry I'd told you she wasn't well," said Mrs. Evans, "but she *is* ill, sir—worse than she will say. She always had such a spirit—she'd never give up till she was obliged to," concluded the good woman piteously, and looking as if for counsel in the face of the tall gentleman, concerning whom and Miss Thornherst she had her own opinion; for Mrs. Evans was not blind, and could tell the signs of the times as well as any one.

Mr. Draycott left shortly afterwards, saying he would call again in the afternoon to know how she was. Which sentence Mrs. Evans prudently refrained from repeating when she went upstairs; for Joan's cheeks were crimson, and her eyes brightened with fever, while an indescribable restlessness and yet drowsiness was upon her. She wanted to sleep and yet could not; and ideas were running over each other so quickly in her head that she became quite bewildered with their dovetailing in such a curious manner into each other, so that she could not tell which words belonged to which sentences. She felt irritable at her own want of command over her thoughts, and at last inclined to cry because Mrs. Evans looked at her as if she did not quite understand her. Finally she dropped off into a sort of doze, that passed on to a heavy kind of stupor; and when Mr. Draycott came in the

afternoon, he was told that the doctor who had been called in thought she was very ill, and talked about inflamation of the lungs. Whereupon Baldwin went to the nearest telegraph office and sent a message to Mrs. Essington, acquainting her with Joan's sudden illness, and praying her to come to her at once.

Three weeks after that October day when Baldwin Draycott met Joan in the Regent's Park, she came downstairs into her sitting-room at Mrs. Evans's for the first time. She had been very ill—so ill that there had been for one sorrowful day some doubt if she would ever recover. Poor Joan! But it was a short attack although it had been a very severe one.

Mrs. Essington had come up to town as soon as she received the telegram; and as there was no accommodation at Mrs. Evans's, and the doctor considered it would be very hazardous to remove Joan, apartments had been secured for her at no great distance, and she spent the greater part of her time with her niece. Mr. Essington had run up to London several times to see his wife, and hear how Joan was from her own lips. Anne Armour had been there nearly every day; but, hearing Mrs. Essington was with the invalid, contented herself with inquiries and messages. She had encountered Mr. Draycott more than once during these calls, and formed her own opinion (like Mrs. Evans, only she did not know as much) of Joan's cautious reticence when speaking to her.

"It will all come right for her," she had thought

to herself the second time she saw him, turning away from the house with a visibly relieved face, just as she was coming up to it. Mrs. Evans was in the act of closing the door, when she caught sight of Miss Joan's friend approaching, and the news she gave her was good. "She's out of all danger, Miss, and going on as well as can be," she said. "She's asked after you a many times, and said I was to tell you to be sure to come up and see her the next time you came. But she's just gone to sleep now, a bit, so I'd wait till to-morrow if I were you."

"Her aunt is still here?" asked Anne, rejoicing to hear Joan was recovering.

"Yes, Miss—leastwise she lodges close by, and comes to see her every day. Ah, and a good lady she is, too. She is not going to let Miss Joan go off to Otago at all, Miss Armour. She's been to the lady that engaged her, and that's all off. *She* doesn't know yet; but this afternoon her aunt is going to tell her."

"Not going?" exclaimed Anne, very much surprised.

"No. You see she was to have been off this very week, and Mrs. Miles couldn't wait. So another young lady has gone in her stead."

Anne turned away, and went thoughtfully back. She had a great deal to think of about this time; and since she had lost Joan to talk to, had been half reckless and half resigned as to her engagement. It was easier to go on with it than to break it off, she found. The marriage could not take place for some little time, because of Ida's death;

and perhaps something might happen in the meanwhile which would help to propel her into a course of action, which would render further indecision impossible. Nothing had been heard from Julian; but then, to be sure, there would not have been time for her to have received a letter.

Joan shed a few quiet tears about the lost situation, but managed to conceal her real grief from her aunt who had been so kind to her. She had fully expected to lose it, so she was not surprised. Still the confirmation of dreaded bad news is always a little painful. "Well! she must get well as soon as she could, and look out for another; that was all," she said, trying to smile, as she looked up in Mrs. Essington's kind face, who bent over her, as she lay on the sofa. "I must not lose heart, must I?"

"You are a 'plucky little thing,' Joan, as you would say yourself; but I most sincerely hope we shall arrange something better than that for you," she answered, kissing her warmly. "How do you feel, now you are up? Do you think you could bear to see Baldwin? He is coming this afternoon, in case you are able to. Poor fellow! he has been here twice a day, always, to ask how you were."

Joan's pale face flushed a little, and her breath came quicker from agitation. "If you think well, auntie, I should like to see and thank him," she said in a low voice, and turning her face to the wall as she spoke. And so, a little later, when Mr. Draycott knocked at the door, Mrs. Evans showed him at once into the small sitting-room, which looked quite full of people when the three were in it.

He came up at once to the sofa, and taking the hand held out to him, stood looking down at her altered face with a very moved one of his own, in spite of a sudden rigidity about the muscles of mouth and chin, showing he put considerable constraint upon himself. Joan lifted her eyes a little shyly, and met his, while a faint colour flickered over her white face. She was feeling very quiet, and even timid, for, during the intervals of her illness, when she was tolerably easy, though too weak to talk much, she had thought a great deal of him —more than she would ever confess to having done, even to herself. After a few inquiries as to how she was, some minutes passed away in talking of indifferent subjects; and then Mrs. Essington declared that if Mr. Draycott would be good enough to stay with Joan for half an hour, she wanted to go out for a little shopping. "That is, if you have time," she added.

Mr. Draycott had time, and would remain, with pleasure. "He might talk to her, but not too much," her aunt then said, "and she was only to speak as little as she could help."

After which, Mrs. Essington left promising not to be long gone, and doing her very best to avoid giving a sly look at her niece as she quitted the room. But Joan rallied a little out of her unusual shy fit, and looking at her visitor with something of her old manner, said—

"What will you do if I get faint? you'll have to pour that carafe of water over me, you know."

He took a chair that stood near the head of the

sofa, and sat down, leaning his arm on it, and covering his face for a moment with his hand, without making any answer. She glanced up at him, fearfully. He was more agitated than she had ever seen him but once before.

"Don't!" she said then, touching him gently. "Do I look so bad? I am feeling very well, only weak, and as if I were not quite sure of anything. But I shall soon be perfectly well again—they all say so."

"My poor child! I had no idea how very ill you have been. Your aunt kept it from me," he said; then, regaining his composure, "Why, you are scarcely like the Joan I used to know, at all. You are very much changed."

"Yes—I am," she answered, quietly.

Then she began to tell him how she had lost the situation in Otago; and how very good her aunt had been to her during her illness. "She has been a mother to me," she declared, with the ready tears coming into her eyes. And he joined cordially with her in praises of both Mrs. Essington and her husband, and spoke a little, but not much of his own affairs; nor of anything very important, either, for he feared agitating her. Then there was a pleasant silence, during which she was resting a little, and felt pleased and contented to have him sitting by her. And he—he was feeling very thankful. Thinking of her as she appeared at Radford, in all her healthful, rosy prettiness, and quiet, yet half-saucy independence, his heart was touched to see her lying there, so still and pale, with gentle, softened manners, and shrinking nervous eyes;

speaking, too, in a slow measured way, as unlike her usual cheery voice as two things could possibly be.

Then Mrs. Essington returned, and he went away, but said he should come and help her to move to the new apartments, where her aunt was, overlooking the Park, in a much better and airier situation than was Mrs. Evans's house.

The next day, with many kind farewells, Joan left her old friends, and went to her aunt's lodgings. It was not far, but the motion of the carriage had shaken her somewhat, and she was glad to go to bed on her arrival. On the morrow, however, she was decidedly better, and from that time rapidly regained her strength. It was understood she was to return with Mrs. Essington to Radford as soon as she was able to bear the journey. Meanwhile Mr. Draycott came and went daily, and told them he was only waiting until his lawyer could raise him a sufficient sum of money on a mortgage effected on the old Hall, and then he would start for Canada.

One afternoon, in the middle of November, they were in the drawing-room together—Baldwin and Joan. Mrs. Essington had gone to her bedroom with a headache, and intended to lie down until dinner. Joan was nearly well, and they were to go to Radford in a few days. Anne had never been to call on Joan since her convalescence, but had written to her repeatedly. Congratulatory letters had been received from Dinan, anent both Joan's recovery and her delayed voyage.

Mr. Draycott had just announced to Joan his

intention of taking his passage to Montreal in the *Blue Jacket,* a well-known vessel on an equally well-known line of steamers. The news was somewhat of a shock to her; for, truth to tell, she was so much changed since she left Radford, that she had been indulging in certain day-dreams of late to an extent she was, perhaps, unaware.

"Then I shall be gone this time next week," he added.

"Don't go yet," she said, looking up at his face wistfully, and her eyes full of bright undropped tears, that trembled in concert with her lips. She was feeling vaguely guilty towards him, as if what had happened had been in part her fault. "Promise me you will stay a little longer."

"Why? where's the good of staying?" said Mr. Draycott, despondingly; leaning his arm on the chimney-piece as he spoke, and looking gloomily down into the fire.

"Something might happen—something good," hazarded Joan, uncertain what to say, but very certain that she wished unaccountably to detain him.

"What good can happen to *me?*" muttered Baldwin, still moody.

"And I'm not well yet! Don't go! Don't leave me, Baldwin! Oh, I'm so sorry!" cried Joan, fairly saying out just what she meant, but scarcely conscious of having uttered aloud what was in her heart to say; for, even as she commenced to speak, she turned away her head and began to sob.

She was very sorry now she was convinced he

had made up his mind to go, and so soon. Only eight days more, and she should never see him again!

Yes, it had come to that at last. By teasing and wrangling—by alternately exciting and soothing her, Mr. Draycott had made for himself a considerable place in Joan's life. From the day when she first knew for certain that he loved her—her exclusive of all the world beside—though the shock of his words and conduct to her had been great, that very shock seemed, by unsettling her before fixed opinions, to give them a chance of taking a different turn for the future. And that turn was begun by hearing of the startling occurrences at Draycott Hall, following so immediately her retreat from Radford; and, all unknown to her, was completed by the sudden light that passed into his grave face, as he lifted his eyes from the ground, and looking up, saw her on that day of their meeting in the Regent's Park. She had been profoundly touched by the misfortunes that had overwhelmed him in such quick succession; but, in the surprise of seeing him, and meeting his eyes with that expression in them, on a sudden, the bands around her heart which had been so weakened, were quietly unloosed—so gently that she did not heed them—and though, until she was recovering from her illness, she resolutely refused to recognise the fact, from that moment he had more of her heart than any one else could ever have.

But Baldwin, bent at first, when there was nothing of this in Joan, to insist upon seeing the beginnings of what was not there, now as resolutely

shut his eyes to the fact—plainly apparent (ah, if Joan had only known! how horrified she would have been!)—to her uncle and aunt, who, wholly content with the turn things had taken, wisely resolved to stand by and say nothing, letting affairs settle themselves—that her thoughts and feelings towards him had undergone the very change so much wished for. Or, if from time to time, he fancied a look in her eyes—an involuntary movement that showed she came near to, and yet would half avoid him at the same time—the changed manner of her speech and manners towards him, betokening a radical difference to her former ways, he drew haughtily back, telling himself he would have no love that came from pity; that such affection would quickly become contempt, and that, moreover, for her own sake, he ought to discourage any such ideas—*if*, from the fact of their existence, they needed such repression.

Meanwhile Joan was crying, with her head leaning on the back of the sofa; and the cough that had so nearly passed away, came back, and tried to choke her in a most practical and unromantic way. Mr. Draycott hastened to her at once, forgetful of everything excepting her health.

"Hush, Joan! You know you are not to excite yourself," he remonstrated. "Why, you are panting for breath! Lift up your head and let me arrange this cushion for you, or shall I call your aunt?" hesitating, and bending over her flushed face, with a dark anxiety visible on his own. "Hush, child, I say!"

What effect this stern "hushing" would have

had on a real "child"—especially on a nervous one—it is impossible to say; but it cooled Joan for the moment, and made her calm enough to resolve to turn the occasion to her own advantage.

"Then, *don't go!* Promise me you will not go next week!" she stipulated entreatingly, trying to stop the flowing of her tears, and resume outward control of herself.

"Well—no, I wont go in the *Blue Jacket* at all events, if you really want me to stay a little longer—until you are well enough to go home .... to Radford," he said, after a second's pause over the familiar name, that went to Joan's heart like a blow, so acutely did she commence to feel for him.

But she did not show the pang that had shot through her at something in his tone; and roused herself to a more upright position, in order to be able to look up at and thank him quietly.

"That's right—you are very good—to—to humour me; but I have been so ill. Thank you."

And she took his cold hand between her own warm ones, and impulsively trusting to the twilight to cover the action—amidst her patting and rubbing it, as if it were a child that wanted comforting, she pressed a little feeling touch of her lips on it, nearly as frankly as if he had been her brother. The next moment, however, she had reddened to her forehead, and felt to her very finger ends a tingling that terrified her by its intensity; for, in an instant she had felt by the quickened pulse and slight start, that her action had been discovered.

"Ah, Joan—what is the use of my staying?" he

burst out, passionately, after a moment's silence, during which her heart beat so very unpleasantly loud, that she felt frightened lest he should hear it; and he, bending over the head of the sofa, had stifled more than one sentence as it rose to his lips. "What would it lead to? We can never be anything to each other *now*—never! Well!" checking himself. "I suppose it is best as it is, after all. I know it is for your sake, even if you had liked me well enough to—— And I suppose it will be best for me, too, in the long run. I shall have no anxieties at least, if I have no joys."

"It is so lonely for you," murmured Joan, not knowing exactly what she ought to say—so saying again what she really thought.

"That doesn't matter. I got used to that when I was a boy," with a little carelessness; and he turned away, and began to walk about the room.

"And if you were ill?"

"I can but die. No more can happen."

"And you have no friends over there! Oh, it so miserable for you!"

"I have no friends anywhere."

"Yes, you have! How can you talk like that? You'll always have *one* friend, Baldwin," she said, lifting herself up from the sofa cushions and looking eagerly across at him as she spoke, hurriedly and passionately; "and that is *I!* I'll be your true friend, and do whatever lies in my power for you, for ever and ever. And though I may not be able to do much, you'll let me do what I can, wont you?"

"That I will. But friends so separated can't

do each other much good," said Baldwin, still despondently.

He was, probably, of opinion that though it would be well to have her as a friend, he would much prefer her as a wife. When one wants cake, bread and butter seems a poor thing.

"But we shall not be so very far away. If I go to New Zealand I shall be much nearer to you than if I were in England," said Joan, becoming rather hazy as to her geography.

"But you know that is all to be given up. Your uncle told me he wouldn't let you go."

"It is not given up at all—only delayed for a little time. I'm no richer than I was: and I've no idea of ending my days in the poor-house, if I can help it. I must, and will work to put by money."

"Why didn't you marry Mr. Aynard, Joan?"

She started, and thanked fate for the twilight. "What's that to you, sir? If you really want to know, however, one of the reasons was that I couldn't stand Mrs. Surtee. Of that amiable 'widder' I have to the full as great a horror as Mr. Weller endeavoured to inculcate in the immortal Sam, anent other ladies of the same persuasion." And, laughing a little, she rose from the sofa and went over to the window to look out. Mr. Draycott followed her, and both stood there talking together.

For the first time, he went into certain particulars concerning the events of the past month or so at the Hall. She listened attentively, every now and then asking a question or two. A good deal

was said concerning Stephen; and the coldness of his brother's behaviour to him was in part accounted for by his unceasing fear lest he should discover something before he went; speaking so feelingly of him and of his death, that Joan's heart melted entirely.

Then there came a pause, during which Baldwin looked despondent, and Joan grave and thoughtful. At last she spoke—slowly, hesitatingly—as if she had not quite made up her mind as to the words. "And you knew all about this, did you? when you spoke to me first about—I mean when you asked me to——"

"What? under Chesney Oak?" with a curious twitch of his eyebrows as he glanced for a moment from beneath them at her, as she stood near him.

"Yes; did you know then how things really were?"

"I have known it for more than three years."

"But surely you would never have married me, had I accepted you, without telling me?"

Baldwin's eyes flashed angrily.

"Of course not! Had any one but you asked me such a question, Joan, I'd have made them repent it."

"Don't be angry, please—don't be angry with me either," she hastened to say, humbly and penitently, hardly daring to glance towards his indignant face.

"I'm not angry with you—much; but I thought you knew me better, or thought better of me than to have had any need of asking such a question."

"Will you forgive me, then?" she said, entreatingly, as she laid her fingers lightly on his arm.

"Forgive you!" he repeated, and seemed for a moment as if about to take the soft hand that touched his tweed coat-sleeve in his; but, as if remembering something, he checked himself; and turning away with a hard-drawn breath, commenced to walk up and down the room, with his hands in his pockets, and a downcast troubled look on his face. Joan watched him furtively and anxiously, even a little wistfully; once or twice her lips parted suddenly, as though she were going to speak, and then a look of irresolution came over her face, and she turned away her eyes from her companion and looked out of the window into the cold London suburban street.

Up and down tramped Mr. Draycott, frowning apparently at the carpet; until at length accidentally looking up, he caught Joan's eyes fixed on him, and stopped his march before her.

"Well!" he said then in a softened tone, in response to the mute, perhaps unconscious pleading in her face.

"Baldwin," she commenced; and then her voice died away, and her eyes sank beneath his troubled, half-absent gaze.

"Well—what?"

"I was going to say something, and I am afraid you will think me very, very bold and impertinent. I would not say it, only that I think——" And Joan stopped, covered with inexplicable confusion, and blushingly crimson, as the words she had tried to say bravely came to a premature end.

Baldwin started a little, and looked keenly at her. Despite the pain visible in his face, in a manner that was permitted to no mortal eyes but hers to see, a softer expression came into it; and though he involuntarily bit his lip from time to time as if to force it into quietude, he was cool and composed enough in manner, as he took Joan's hand in his for a second and wrung it. Then he dropped it and turned shortly away again to resume his promenade round the room, up one side of the long dining-table, past the *buffet*, down the other side, and past Joan's window.

"I don't think we shall mistake one another's meaning again, Joan," he said; "so speak on. I promise you I shall not think anything you may choose to say either impertinent or unfitting."

Joan had seen the expression of his face as he went away; she could read him sometimes as well as ever he had read her. The impatient, heart-sore look—the simple despair in his action—turned the scale in the wavering balance, and gave her courage to try to go on with what she wished to say, in spite of her beating heart that seemed trying to climb up into her throat by a series of convulsive jumps. She knew, better than he could tell her, that he loved her greatly; that to gain her as wife would be the only thing which could in some measure console him for what he had lost; that he would never—never now, ask her to share his nameless poverty; and so *she* would speak if *he* would not. She had his promise that he would not misinterpret her words, or think ill of her meaning; but take it simply, literally, as she meant it.

"Baldwin," she said again, in a low voice which trembled in spite of herself. "Baldwin—if I—if you—that is—oh! dear Baldwin—if it would make you any happier to have me for your wife, I should be so proud—so glad—to have the right to love you always, and take care of you, and try to comfort you—if you will let me—if you would like it, and if I could."

Joan's voice was very weak and faint before she finished her say, and her bowed head hid a shamed face in her hands; shrinking within herself, and nearly scared to death at her own boldness, she stood trembling beside the crimson curtains of the window, with a sound as of rushing waters bubbling noisily in her tingling ears.

There was utter silence in the dining-room at No. 50, Palmer Road, St. John's Wood, London, N.W. A horrid silence to one occupant, and one which she began to wish would be broken by anything loud and startling—the more so the better—that could by any possibility occur. What it was to the other does not appear; but a silence there was, so great, that Joan's dismayed breaths—soft as *they* were—were the only sounds heard.

Then—"I don't believe you, Joan!" came across the air to her, in husky accents, from where Mr. Draycott was standing with folded arms at the other end of the room, where he had been summarily arrested in his walk, by her words.

In instant involuntary questioning, up went Joan's face and eyes to see if he meant it seriously or was joking, "good-naturedly," she thought to herself with a pang at her heart—to take the

awkwardness from her of having acted such a ridiculous part. But quicker even than they were lifted, down they sank again, before the dark flashing orbs that met them.

"If you are in real earnest, come over here, and look me in the face while you tell me so again."

She hesitated; this was verily too much to expect of her—a great deal more than she meant to do. Joan looked up—and Joan looked down; Joan didn't know exactly what to do. Still she thought she ought to go on, as she had commenced. While she was still hesitating, she heard a voice say "Come," in accents at once commanding and entreating.

And instinctively obeying her impulse, she left her station beside the window and moved slowly—slowly over to where the motionless form of her companion stood awaiting her at the other end of the room.

But you see, now, how impossible it is, in this world to have a few moments of unadulterated single-mindedness! At the very moment of her turning her back to the window, she caught sight of two of the children in the house opposite peering at her through the lace curtains of *their* dining-room, with evident and precocious interest in their fell young eyes. I don't mean to say the thoughts which had full possession of her mind before, were expelled by this circumstance or greatly injured by it; but she was certainly impressed by a curious power of the mind for noticing little unimportant events in a sidelong way, while at the same time

actively engaged on some topic of absorbing interest.

Noiselessly she advanced however, and at length stood before the man she had just asked to marry her. But she found it was hardly any good to have come, as her tongue absolutely refused to fulfil the other part of the injunction—viz., to repeat what she had said.

"Oh, Joan!" said Baldwin; then his voice sinking to a whisper, "Wont you say that again? *Can't* you say that again?" And his hands came heavily on her shoulders, holding her out at arms' length from him, as she stood there, alternately white and red.

Joan was dumb, she neither spoke nor moved; only her head sank lower and lower.

"Tell me, did you mean what you said just now?"

A silence still; then a mutter, very indistinct.

"Look up at me, and speak out," said the unreasonable Baldwin; still holding her by the shoulders that were trying to shrink away from him, but that his voice was tender, although imperative, Joan could have hated him for his cruel persistence.

"Oh!" was all she said from behind the hands that covered her face, "how can you ask me?" And her voice sounded very like crying.

With a sudden strong movement, he threw his arms around her and caught her to him, and with one last comical thought of those children over the way, and a devout though unuttered hope that they could not see her, Joan bowed her burning face on

Baldwin's shoulder, and yielded herself passively to the embrace that seemed as if about to crush and crumble her to bits. There is no doubt that, had she been friable, something disastrous of the kind would have occurred; but luckily for more than herself, she was pretty tough, and stood it manfully, although she certainly felt as though she were having all the breath squeezed out of her, and trusted that she would be able to bear it. Joking apart, however, a queen might have envied the feelings of deep, sure, moved happiness that sent the tears welling up to her eyes—that put in her heart a warmth that will never die out until death quenches it for ever.

Happy, however, though she felt, she did not want to have it *seen* that she was so, and therefore was thankful of any shelter that would conceal her flushed checks and full eyes from the person to whom they now belonged. But it seemed as though their new possessor wished to test their value and feast his eyes upon the beauty of his recent acquisition; for presently a pertinacious hand came under her chin and turned her face up to be inspected.

"Say it again, my darling—say it again, Joan. Let me be sure you are not jesting—that you will be content with the love I have for you, the little besides it that I can offer you?"'

"What shall I say?" murmured Joan, with a shaken voice, and all sense of comicality ebbing out of her, until it left her earnest and steadfast; strong in her love if in nought else, and a feeling of great awe and solemnity coming upon her as

she thought of what she had undertaken; of the power that had been placed in her hands of being the only person in the world who was able to give back somewhat of the happiness of resignation to the lonely man before her, who had suffered so much, lost so much, loved *her* so much.

"Say what you think I should most like to hear. Say neither more nor less than is in your heart this moment, Joan."

And she, yielding to his wish, looked up, glancing shyly into his face; meeting his eyes, whose fire was softened by loving entreaty, and showing a lovely face in its mingled brightness and earnestness.

"Baldwin," she stammered, "I like you very much; I will try to be a good wife to you if you will let me." (It is only fair to say that after the first few words the rest of the sentence was lost as to audible utterance, had any one been in the room to listen.)

But the ear for which they were alone designed was near enough and quick enough to understand each word as it was formed; and, at length satisfied, he clasped again his well-loved in his arms—his hardly-earned, his nearly-lost wife that was to be: his friend, sister, brother, father, mother—all for Baldwin united in her from henceforth.

CHAPTER X.

WHO CAME FROM BUENOS AYRES.

AS you have seen, Anne was much disturbed when, calling to see Joan, she learnt she was very ill. It had seemed to her that her last hopes of disengaging herself from her position was in some way or other connected with her, and when this failed, thrown back on herself, a reaction took place, and she determined to give no more care or thought to Julian or her own wishes, but to endeavour to make the best of circumstances and take all the good her new prospects would afford her. She would think of all that money could bring her, and begin to lay plans for her future life, at the same time resolving to offer no opposition to the speedy marriage she had every reason to believe Mr. Alcott would propose as soon as it was possible for him to do so. And then they would go abroad to Paris and Rome. If her union could not bring her love, it would at all events give her the pleasures of novelty and excitement.

Change—change! This was what she panted for, as she would sit working hard at her tapestry, wrapped up in herself, and, since Ida's death, more isolated from her own family than ever. Such a heavy oppression had come on her that she rarely or ever lost sight of her morbid self-consciousness in these days; a kind of dull remorse was on her,

and she could not distinguish whence it came. It was not because of her conduct towards Julian, for she insisted that she had done well; it was not that she felt she was doing Mr. Alcott a wrong in consenting to become his wife without having one spark of affection for him; it was not that she had hastened Ida's death, for had she not done all in her power to avert it? but it was a compound of all these, and at times it was more than she could bear.

The work would fall from her powerless hands, and she would feel as if she must sink away and *die* unless some help came to stimulate her. Her health, however, was not worse than it had been lately. She was not strong nor well, but there was nothing absolutely defined the matter with her. She had no one to whom she could complain, now her newly-found friend was ill; and, shut up in her own heart, her miseries rushed back on her in almost overwhelming force.

The happiest days were certainly those when George Alcott came to see her. She would begin talking at once upon what she should like to do. How pleased she should be to travel on the Continent! Would he not take her there? She longed for a little amusement, she told him; her life had been so dull! She would like the travelling, too, so much! She had never been on a steamer in her life; and oh, how pleased she should be to go to Paris, and see all the sights and beauties of that beautiful place! And Mr. Alcott, delighted to see her face flushed and animated, and to have her looking eagerly at him, like a child praying for a new toy, hastened to assure her she should have

all she wished, provided his mother went with them. He could never leave *her* alone, he said: and although Anne was chafed and impatient at the idea of having her with them (for she felt she could manage her son better alone), she could not but respect him for his thorough hearty love for the gentle little widow.

Julian would have had time to answer the letter she had written to him while at Margate, she thought; but, of course, he would not write, it was more dignified to treat her with utter silence. It was best—best it should be so. And she would be married very soon now, and leave dull, disagreeable England, where every single thing was poisoned by *recollection*. Casting all that belonged to the past behind her for ever and for ever, she would press forward eagerly towards the future; and she would be very happy—happy abroad, and happy when they came back. She should like to live in the country, and never come near London, excepting for a month or two in the height of the season, when they would hire a house near Hyde Park; and never go out on foot at all, only in a carriage or on horseback. Anne began to feel she should like riding. She would have a horse who would go very quickly, would seem to fly along with her. She should be glad to feel the swift easy motion, and the cool air rushing past her face, as she bent low over the creature's neck, and urged him on fast—faster still, with voice and whip. Onward, onward! she almost felt as if she were in the saddle now, as she leant her head on the arm of the sofa, where she had been working, and hiding her face in her

hands to shut out all the world, tried to realize the scene and the sensations it would give her. And she would be looking beautiful too, and all men would admire her, as she dashed past them on her great, swift horse with her long habit trailing almost to the ground, and the reins gathered up in her gauntleted strong hand, while with her eager, hungry eyes, she stared on ahead to see the way she had yet to traverse; if it were smooth—if there were obstacles—calculating how many miles she could go yet before the animal she rode would be wearied. She could fancy never being tired herself—that she would always be in a sort of restless fever, the only relief from which would be the most violent exercise that she could take. Then the pleasurable excitement of feeling the powerful creature beneath her yield, be *compelled* to cede to her superior intelligence and government! To rein him in when running his fleetest; to feel that sense of power that thrills even the best and gentlest—how much more then the reckless, the bold, and daring? who hold their lives so lightly, too, that the chance fall, or false, short leap into a deep stream, where horse and rider could be swept away struggling by a strong current, seems to have no terror, only a kind of relief to them, if they ever give the chance a thought.

Thinking thus, Anne fancied there was some one come in the room with her, for previously she had been alone. That indefinite sense of a presence which presents itself suddenly and strongly to the mind at times, when neither sight nor hearing have announced the fact, came suddenly on her. Care-

lessly lifting her head (for she supposed it was either her stepmother or Julia who had entered quietly, and did not care to have her do-nothing attitude remarked on) she saw the figure of a gentleman advancing towards her from the door which was open. She sprang up, amazed; refusing to believe her eyes. It was Julian Home.

With a cry that rang through the silent house, the next instant she was in his arms, forgetful of everything but that he was there. Not an hour seemed to have passed since they parted in that very room, not a word spoken to any one else, not a thought given to anything that was not of him. "Oh, my dearest—my dearest!" she cried, beside herself, for the moment with her mad, wild joy, as she threw her arms round his neck, and pressed her lips to his cheek; never heeding that he stood passively there, and that, though there was no repulse, there was no encouragement in his manner.

Then all at once she remembered, and as suddenly as she had come, would have shrunk away; but the hand that had given her no welcome nor greeting, detained her by a firm grasp on her arm. With one of the quiet, quick movements peculiar to him, Mr. Home closed the door of the room, and came up to her where she was still standing when he had left her, petrified and conscience stricken. It was towards the end of a November afternoon, and the air being dull and thick, the light came in greyly through the half-drawn-down blinds. He drew Anne towards the window, and holding her before him by the arms, looked steadily into the pallid face which drooped lower and still lower, in utter shame

and abasement, before him. They stood there a few seconds in silence.

"Anne," he said then, speaking for the first time, "you wrote to me breaking our engagement?"

"Yes," she whispered, very faintly, not able to look up.

"Do you know that it might have killed me? I was very ill at the time, and all agitation was especially forbidden me? Did you think I might have opened your letter for cheering and consolation from the woman I so loved—for whose sake I had come where I was then (and where I nearly lost my life)—and who I thought loved me, and found some of the cruellest, basest words that were ever written by one human being to another."

Utter silence. She was trembling violently, and could not respond. Her voice was gone—she felt as though she should never speak a word again. With bowed head and lowered eyes, and a heart whose every pulse would have seemed stilled, if it had not been for a low, dull throbbing pain, she stood there before him, at once her accuser and her judge. If it could only be quick! she thought. A few minutes longer of this hard, yet calm reproach from the familiar lips which had never yet but on one occasion spoken any words but those of love and thought for her, would kill her. She must die—she would have neither strength nor wish to live.

"I think you would never have seen me again, Anne, had it not happened that with your letter another was brought to me; and that I chose to

read it first, before breaking the seal of yours. I wished to have any business I might have to read of (as it was from my uncle's lawyer, whose handwriting I knew) over first, before I opened yours, that would be so pleasant, so inexpressibly dear to me. Letters from those one loves are very sweet to receive when one is far away, sick and alone in a strange land."

"Julian—forgive!" Anne managed to gasp out; and she made a movement, as if in her repentant humiliation she would have fallen on her knees before him. But he, still holding her fast, continued, as if he had not seen her half-attempted action.

"The first letter acted as an antidote to the poison in the second—in *yours*, Anne. It is fortunate that it chanced so or I should have probably had a relapse, which I was told would have been fatal in my case."

"Have you come home to England because of my letter, Julian? have you given up your situation in Buenos Ayres?" asked Anne, endeavouring to calm her agitation and collect her ideas.

"The situation has been resigned, and I am here, Anne."

"I have brought you nothing but misery," she sighed; and her tone was almost despairing as she added, "but—but—didn't I say plainly?—what was the use, Julian—what was the use of coming?"

"I have come to tell you, Anne, that I can only consent to release you from our engagement upon one condition."

"What is that?" she asked wonderingly, and

looking up involuntarily and perplexed. Although conscious that she had offended him past forgiveness, she did not feel any fear of him after those first few seconds. It did not seem possible that he who had always been so good to her, should be unkind—that the familiar voice should grow bitter and harsh. For could he not see that she was unhappy and ill, as she bent deprecatingly before him, in her deep mourning dress, with the traces of the vague, miserable tears she had been shedding before he came, still visible on her pale suffering face?

"You must tell me, Anne, either that you have ceased to care for me, or that you love some other man better than you have ever loved me. One of those two things you must positively and solemnly affirm before I tell you I consent to release you. Can you say so?"

Anne had started and looked aghast: and now she hesitated long and painfully before she answered. But he waited silently and patiently for her to speak; so, at last, finding she must absolutely reply, "I cannot say that—it would not be true. But, Julian, you *must* release me—indeed you must, I am going to marry some one else."

"How dare you tell me so, Anne? Are you conscious of what you are saying? Are you most wicked or most foolish in having had such a thought?"

"It may be wicked, but it is not foolish; and it is to be so—I cannot draw back a *second* time." And Anne, though her voice was very low, spoke firmly, with her eyes on the ground.

There was a moment's silence; then, "You are very cruel and selfish, Anne. You seem to put me on one side altogether—never to give a thought to what I feel."

"And do *I* feel nothing? shall *I* live a life of unmixed happiness?" she asked, quickly, her tones those of sharp pain. "Be generous, Julian, and leave me! If you only knew what I have endured lately: you are aware that *she* is dead?"

"I suspected so. Poor child!" said Mr. Home, gravely.

"You know," said Anne, her tears beginning to flow, and her voice broken by her emotion—"you I know—I said in my letter—it was partly for her. I could not see her want, Julian—dearest Julian, you must forgive me; I have loved you so all along!"

"Then how can you think of doing any one the great wrong of marrying him, after saying what you have just said to me?" demanded Mr. Home.

"Oh, I must tell you all, I see," said Anne, despairingly, and throwing back her hair, part of which had got loose and fallen over her face, with a gesture, half petulant, half resigned. "He was very kind, and so was his mother to—to Ida; and he is well-off, and took a liking to me—and so I said I would be his wife; and then I had written to you, and sent back all the letters and my locket——"

Mr. Home touched his watch-guard, and she observed the trinket was fastened to it.

"And I am going to keep my promise," she concluded, after a pause. "Don't make it more difficult for me, Julian—dear Julian! You liked

me once—pity me now—and help me. I cannot go back from what I have said——"

"You made very light of going back from what you said to *me*, Anne. But be it as you wish. Just look me in the face and say, 'I love some one better than you,' and I will go. You shall have what letters of yours I hold back, and I will never trouble you again. Say so, Anne—say so!" and he looked keenly into her face, challenging her to answer him.

Slowly she nerved herself to raise her eyes to his face. Never had he looked so handsome, although very grave and determined. He was browned by the sea-voyage, and for the first time she remarked that he was dressed in deep mourning. But it was the same familiar, beautiful face that was so inexpressibly dear to her, which she had only thought of as thousands of miles away, and which she was never to see again—while she was free at least; and the full consciousness of what she should lose in losing him, rushed on her, and, inexpressibly disturbed and agitated, she fluttered and shrank beneath his hands.

"You know I cannot say that!" she burst out, at last, desperately and almost fiercely. "I have tried to forget you—and I love you more than ever—that is all I have gained by it! I could kneel down and kiss the very ground you tread on—I envy the very air you breathe—the servants who wait on you! I love you more than my own self-respect—more than my own life—more—yes, even more than all my hopes of future happiness! There! will that satisfy you? Have I humbled myself sufficiently?"

Mr. Home had released her shoulders and taken her two hands in his; standing bending over her bowed form, as, in an anguish of misery, she almost cowered before him. He did not speak, but there was a palpable triumph in his very silence.

"I have decided," spoke Anne again, with increased agitation, and very quickly, between broken breaths. "Come what may, I will not keep my promise to Alcott, any more than I have to you. I cannot—I should die! I will see and tell him all; and he is good—he will have pity on me. But I will never see you again, Julian, after this. I never will! Burn my letters, and forgive me. Oh, if I could ever have made you amends for the injury I have inflicted on you—poor, poor fellow! Oh, if I were only rich! How *could* you sacrifice your position in Buenos Ayres to come after such a worthless creature as I am? How *could* you, Julian?" and Anne fairly burst into a passion of tears. "Go—go!" she sobbed. "I cannot bear it! There! you have my solemn oath—I break promises easily, it seems; but an oath will be more binding. Though I cannot—will not marry you, because you are poor, and I abhor poverty—I will marry no one else. Do you hear me? Say you forgive me, and go. Oh, I *cannot* bear it." And, almost beside herself, Anne snatched her hands away, and would have rushed from the room, only that Mr. Home stopped her; and took her, trembling and weeping, into his arms, pressing his lips fondly and passionately on her wet cheek.

"Never! my own darling—never, Anne! I am not poor now; and I will not leave you until you

again say that you will be my wife. I am rich, Anne; or shall be so very shortly. The letter I spoke about opening before I read yours, told me that my uncle's two sons were both dead—poor fellows! Died of typhus fever nearly two months ago. I am my uncle's heir, Anne; and you know that he is rich. Will that satisfy you—or must it be that other fellow—what is his name?—after all?"

With a half-shriek—the remembrance of what she had been saying to him rushing on her mind, and overwhelming her with shame—she tried to wrench herself from his embrace to which she had helplessly submitted at first; but she was laughingly, yet firmly, held fast. Covered with inexpressible confusion, she still struggled hard to free herself; and Mr. Home, seeing her real distress, at last gave way, and allowed her to retreat from him to the sofa.

"Oh, what have I said?" she murmured. "What could have induced me to—but I thought I was never going to see you again—I did indeed." And her face was buried in the cushions as if she never meant it to come to light again.

A step was heard on the stairs, and Mr. Home started.

"Put on your bonnet, and come out with me, Anne," he said, a little peremptorily. "I want you, and we may be disturbed here. Your sister Julia knows I have come, for she let me in, having seen me from the window; and she or your mother may probably be of opinion that our conversation has lasted long enough. But I have still much to say to you."

And Anne, glad to get away for a moment,

hastened to put on her out-door dress, and rejoin him. He stood talking with Mrs. Armour on the landing-place outside the drawing-room door, looking very grave and sympathizing, while she had her handkerchief to her eyes.

"I have asked Anne to walk with me a little way, Mrs. Armour," he said. "She has your permission?"

"If she chooses to do so; she must be the best judge of her own affairs," she responded, hesitating, and looking perplexedly from one to another.

"Yes, mamma," muttered Anne, thankful for the thick veil over her face; and they descended the staircase, and went out at the hall-door, leaving that lady staring after them with all her eyes.

She hastened to the window (Julia did the same below stairs) to look after them; and behold the two walking very quietly down the street, arm-in-arm, as in old times.

"What do they *mean* by it?" cried Julia.

"I never yet encountered such proceedings," said her stepmother, "never! It is utterly shameless! That wretched girl wants looking after: I shall tell your father; I will not be held responsible for her conduct."

"I shall write to George Alcott—he ought to know," said Julia, hurriedly. "Don't you think I had better do so, mamma?"

"As you like," said Mrs. Armour, resignedly: "she is altogether too much for me."

"He ought to know what a worthless creature he trusts his happiness to," said Julia, looking about eagerly for the blotting-case and ink. "Not

that I think he was ever *really* touched by her, you know; but she got him into her artful clutches, and he didn't know how to extricate himself. What *will* he say?"

Meanwhile Anne and Julian were walking together as they did in old times. How long that seemed ago! and there was very much to tell on either side. Mr. Home could not have been more sympathizing if he had been the real brother of the dead girl; and for the second time since she was gone, Anne spoke freely of her, and of the great sadness that surrounded her last days; and though she wept bitterly as she clung to his arm, while they paced round and round the four sides of a neighbouring square, where as utter quiet reigned as if every house were uninhabited, she felt to a degree comforted. He was so good, and so genuinely true. He would not give her more comfort than he felt he honestly could do; but Anne was assured by his earnest words of the perfect happiness that her sister must be enjoying from the very nature of her character, as well as from God's widespreading mercy. And then they spoke somewhat of themselves.

His uncle was very ill, although there was no immediate danger; and Julian was staying with him and his wife at their town-house, near Euston Square. He had only arrived in London that morning, having travelled from Liverpool by the earliest train. His relations expected him, as he had sent a telegram respecting his arrival, and had received him with all the cordiality due to the new

position which he was to hold towards them. There was a good deal of business to be attended to, for since his uncle had been ill—illness caused by excessive grief, as well as by the shock of his sons' death—he would attend to nothing, telling the lawyer that Mr. Julian would see to it when he returned.

"I shall tell my aunt all about you to-night, Anne, if I can make the opportunity," he said. "You will like her, for she is very gentle and kind-hearted. My uncle has always been a stern, harsh husband to her, while in health, but he turns to her now as his only comfort."

Anne's heart beat as she heard him speak thus to her of her future connexions.

"But—but are you sure they wont object?" she asked, falteringly.

"What! to you? No. Besides, that is my affair."

And then they returned to the house, and Anne went upstairs, while Mr. Home walked into the dining-room to Mr. Armour, who was there reading the newspaper.

Directly Anne entered her room she was followed into it by her sister Julia.

"I think it is well to tell you I have sent for George Alcott," she commenced in an excited tone, and looking slightly flushed, though whether pleasurably so or not Anne could not decide.

"Have you? what for?" she asked quickly, turning hurriedly round from the looking-glass.

"That he may see with his own eyes and hear with his own ears your disgraceful conduct and

outrageous flirtation with Mr. Home! Of course when *I* told him what you were, it was all put down to jealousy; although I actually gave myself the trouble to warn him against you, by hinting what an unstable character you were—how that you thought nothing of trifling with the affections of one man, all the time being engaged to another."

"And you have really sent for him—for Mr. Alcott, at this time of the day, too? You have written to him at his hotel, Julia?" And Anne's eyes flamed wrathfully in the twilight.

"Most certainly I have. He will have received the letter by this time," says the undaunted Julia, exulting like a sea-gull at the approaching storm that was plainly about to burst.

"How *dared* you do so, Julia? what folly possessed you to attempt to meddle with my affairs?" asked Anne, whose anger was very great, and who commenced to tremble at the thought of a possible encounter between the two men.

"*Dared*, indeed! And pray who are you that dares to use such language to your eldest sister?" retorted Julia, with prompt asperity. "Yes, I did *dare*, and will *dare* again, to endeavour to save an honest, warm-hearted man from the unprincipled trifling of a mean, dishonourable creature like you are!"

"Moderate your words, Julia, I counsel you! or I shall punish you in a manner you little expect," spoke Anne, with slow resentment, and clutching as she spoke at Julia's tiny wrists, with a force and determination that both looked and felt dangerous. Miss Julia wriggled with great energy, and looked

very uncomfortable. Probably, for the moment, she rather regretted the small and fairy-like proportions which she had so often complacently compared with the superior size and strength of those of her sister. At any rate she could not help feeling that the position was disagreeable, and ought by rights *to have been reversed.*

"Don't touch me!" shricked little Miss Armour, who presented a very vixenish aspect indeed at that moment, with her eyes and teeth gleaming in concert. "Your very hands are pollution!"

"As for your remarks about seniority," continued Anne, more quietly, calming as the other warmed, and decidedly liking their present relative positions; her height and size giving her an apparent and real superiority over her little antagonist that was emphatic, "you know I hold the infidel creed that when young women pass the age of twenty or thereabouts, the advantage is decidedly on the side of the youngest. And now answer me, if you please, and as civilly as you can find it in your nature to do so. Do you expect to see Mr. Alcott *here* to night? Did you ask him to come?"

"I sent a note to him by the boy at the shop at the corner; but he was told he must leave it as Mr. Alcott was out for the evening," returned Julia, sullenly, under compulsion.

"Very well. Then I suppose no harm will come of it, as I, also, shall write an explanation to him, of what has passed this evening; and he will probably open both letters about the same time. And now, Julia, let there be an end to this eternal strife

between us. In a very few weeks I shall leave this house for ever. In a few days with papa's permission, I am going on a visit to an aunt of Julian's, and shall spend most of the time between this and our marriage with her. If I were inclined to be disagreeable, I might here say something about my leaving the field open for you with Mr. Alcott now; as it is, I shall say nothing, being well able to afford to be silent. The next few hours are probably some of the very last we shall ever spend together under the same roof, and remembering this, in Ida's name—for her dear, dead sake—let there be peace between us at last."

Hereupon having said what she meant to, Anne released Miss Julia's hands, who saw fit to burst out into tears; tears of mingled mortification and regret. Anger at Anne's at length and so completely claiming her mastery both physical and mental over her whose viperish tongue had stung a hundred times without a repulse, especially of late; and grievous sorrow at the sudden remembrance of her poor young sister's death thus brutally, as she considered it, brought up to her recollection. Yet she felt glad at the fact of another chance, although a poor one, opening to her in the Alcott direction; and certainly, no feeling of dissatisfaction in that Anne was going to be persuaded into eating her own words, and marrying a poor man after all.

Anne hastily finished arranging her hair to a running accompaniment of Julia's sniffles, and then turned to go downstairs, as she thought that Julian would have quite exhausted his explanation

and representations to her father by that time, and might be waiting impatiently for her.

"Then I suppose as we shall see no more of you that you are going out with him to America?" said Julia, looking at her curiously, as she dried her eyes, and endeavoured to calm her flushed nose.

"No, I am not," returned Anne, coldly, restraining her wish to add, "He is rich now," by the certain knowledge that if she did so, Julia would belie her nature and custom if she did not instantly give utterance thereupon to some highly piquant little speech, in a style peculiarly her own, which must infallibly break the species of truce proposed between them.

Then she went downstairs; Mr. Home stood at the foot of them. He held his hat in his hand ready to depart, and was only waiting to say good-bye to her.

"Have you told papa?" whispered Anne.

"Mr. Armour is aware of the changed positions in which both of us stand," was his answer as he bent over her, clasping her hand in his. This attitude, the pose of his dark-haired head, the old familiar *soupçon* of cigarette smoke lingering about him and struggling to assert itself, though it had to do battle with the more orthodox perfume of his gloves and handkerchief, was so like "old times," so repelled from her mind every thought of George Alcott, with his sunburnt face and frizzly reddish hair, that Anne felt her exulting heart beginning to realize more fully than hitherto the greatness of her gain; the supreme wretchedness to which she would

have condemned herself had she really married her Australian wooer, and *afterwards* met Julian again himself unmarried and still free.

She looked up at him almost with adoration: at him, "her beautiful—her own," in the dim light, and wondered anew, with ever a deeper and deeper humility, what he could see in *her* to love. She reproached herself as she stood there, with the excitement of the evening still upon her, beating with unabated force in each throbbing pulse, with never having loved him enough—never having thought sufficiently highly of him, or how she could ever—ever have consented to receive another in his stead? Even if their union was doomed never to take place, surely the fact of having once loved and been loved by such a man as Julian should have left her with the fixed idea that advancement by marriage was for her a thing impossible.

"Bid your mamma and sister good evening for me," he continued, "as I am obliged to hasten away in order to keep an appointment with a friend at nine o'clock."

"And—and when shall I see you again?" asked Anne, feeling all her courage ebb away at the idea of her being left to face her family—to face George Alcott—by herself. Their characters seemed almost reversed; it was Anne who clung to Julian now, she who felt more than ever it had been perhaps possible for *him* to feel how awful would be her loneliness, how complete and crushing her despair, if deprived of his love and the support it gave her.

"Shall we take a drive to-morrow afternoon?" he asked. "I shall come for you at half-past two; will that hour suit your convenience?"

"Oh yes; I'll be ready."

"Then *au revoir*, my darling: not adieu *this* time, thank God," he said, and then went; the street-door closing just as Julia ran lightly down the staircase. Her curiosity had got the better of her dignity. She was literally burning with eagerness to know the particulars of Anne's sudden change of suitors, and the where and when, and all about her approaching marriage.

"Then if you are not going to live in America where *are* you going to live?" she asked. "Shall you be in London?"

Anne paused a moment; and then reflecting that after her behaviour to Mr. Alcott, she really did not deserve good treatment at her hands, said, "You will probably know to-morrow."

"Well, I'm sure! that's polite! I think that if I am good enough to take an interest in what concerns you—for it has really nothing whatever to do with *me*, one way or another—you might answer civilly when I ask a simple question like that. Of course, if you consider it *prying*, there is no more to be said, except that I shall not trouble you again in like manner."

"Perhaps it would be just as well you should know very little about my affairs, Julia, as you seem so very ready to interfere with them." And Anne coolly walked off into the dining-room to her father.

"What is this I hear, Anne?" he asked, wearing

a slightly mystified, but on the whole a satisfied expression of face. "You are going to jilt Alcott now, and take on Home again? You're a nice young woman!"

"Yes, papa," said Anne, smiling faintly, and going up to him to kiss him.

"But what is to be done about the other? Mind, I wash my hands of it altogether. It is your own affair, and you may manage it which way you will."

"I suppose I must write, and of course if he calls I must see him," said Anne, with a sinking at heart that was only prevented from being very great because of the intense joy and contentment in it already. But a mingled dread and self-reproach was making her feel very humble, in spite of her coming exaltation.

"And you think you will be happier with him than with the other one, eh?" said Mr. Armour, eyeing her smilingly and reflectively.

"Yes, papa. But the Alcotts have been very good to us."

It was one of the most difficult things any one could ever have had to do, to write that letter; but it was written, and taken to the post, before Anne went to bed that night.

It was a poor performance after all, whose only merit was its truthfulness. She did not try to make the best out of so lame a story; but, simply telling all the circumstances, left it to his honour to release her. She should never cease, while she had life, to be grateful to him for kindnesses to her poor sister, kindnesses so great that they never

could be repaid; but it was better for him, as well as for herself, to break the engagement existing between them; for she loved some one else too well ever to make a good wife to him. It was better that their union should have been prevented, than that it should have been repented of; and earnestly asking him to forgive—not her present conduct, but her ever having first encouraged him, and then accepted him as her future husband—she ended her letter, and put it in the nearest office with her own hands, late at night though it was.

CHAPTER XI.

"OMNIA VINCIT AMOR."

MRS. ESSINGTON'S step was heard crossing the room above their heads, and Joan tried with all her might to get Baldwin away before she should join them. She was in a state of genuine trepidation when she thought of her aunt's triumphant satisfaction over the occurrences of the last hour or so; and she dreaded lest she should hear of it before she (Joan) had had time to compose herself and prepare for the coming ordeal of mingled quizzing and crowing over, which she well knew would be ready for her. She had some little difficulty in persuading Mr. Draycott to vanish before her aunt came downstairs again, and he only did so on the understanding that he should join them later in the evening.

"Your aunt told me to come to dinner," he said, remonstratingly.

"Oh, never mind. *I* tell you to stop away," said Joan, half imperiously and half coaxingly.

"If you would really rather have my room than my company, I will go; but I shall certainly walk in soon afterwards, and you'll have to invent some excuse for my not stopping, for she knows I have no engagement."

"Very well. Do [redacted]d she actually took

him by the arm, and led him persuadingly to the door.

"Baldwin, is that you? You're to stay, you know," said Mrs. Essington, descending the stairs with a lighted candle in her hand. "You were not thinking of going, were you?" she added, looking inquiringly at him.

The light shone full on his face as he stood in the dark hall. Joan, when she saw her aunt coming, had ignominiously and noiselessly retreated, closing the door of the drawing-room, and leaving him to bear the brunt of the conversation.

"I find I cannot stay, thank you, as I have to go to my lodgings for—for a letter I expect."

"Well, be sure you come for the evening, then."

And he answered he would, certainly. Then closing the hall-door he was gone, and Mrs. Essington turned into the drawing-room.

"Haven't you rang for a light yet?" she asked, surprised.

"No," answered Joan from the sofa, where she had curled herself up with her back to her aunt. She was feeling the reaction from the excitement that had supported her during the afternoon, and was shaking with agitation and a good deal of weakness besides.

"What is the matter? Don't you feel so well?" Mrs. Essington asked, struck by her voice, and going over to her to put her hand on her shoulder. "Why, you are actually trembling! Did you have any wine this afternoon?"

"No—I forgot it."

"Then you must have it now," ringing the bell for it.

When the servant brought it in on a waiter, and the candles as well, Mrs. Essington looked at Joan, as she raised herself up to take the glass; and having waited until the girl had left the room, said, very quietly—

"Why wouldn't you let Baldwin stop to dinner? Weren't you well enough?"

"Now for it," thought Joan, feeling decidedly the better for the port wine she had just drank. "I wanted to tell you something first, auntie," she said, diffidently.

"I don't think you need. I fancy I know it already," said Mrs. Essington, smiling, and opening her arms, as her niece rose and came over to her. "You foolish girl! Fancy sending him away without his dinner for that!" And though some tears came into her own eyes, she laughed a little, jestingly, as she put her face down and kissed warmly and repeatedly that of her niece, which was pressed against her neck.

"So it has all happened at last as it ought to have at first!" she said, after a few minutes, during which shamefaced Joan had told her how matters stood between her and Mr. Draycott—never hinting, however, that it was actually she herself who had proposed after all.

"I declare I began to fear it never would come to pass. What will your uncle say, Joan? I shall write and tell him this very night."

"Please don't, auntie."

"Indeed, I shall. What do you suppose I

bringing you here in London for, but to give you two an opportunity of making up your minds? *You* could have travelled days ago, but I know he would not come back to Radford. And now, I suppose, there'll be a wedding directly. I declare it is very unselfish in me to help you, for of course I'd rather have you with me than let you go away."

And then there was a good deal of talk between them.

"I think—no—I know I am doing well in accepting him now, auntie," said Joan; "but I would not have married him for all the world, if he were just what he was when he first asked me. If he had still been well off, tortures shouldn't have forced me into marrying so overbearing and arrogant a—— But I should not talk like this," she interrupted herself with, blushing under the amused look in her aunt's face, when she once more began to speak in her old vehement style, protesting against the arbitrary behaviour of Mr. Draycott.

"Well, after all, Joan, I don't see he did anything so very bad to *you*. To any other girl, I will allow it would have been—well, somewhat *too* persistent; but as for *you*, why, he had your own words for what *you* would have done had you been placed in a similar position; and he thought, I presume, that he couldn't do better than follow your example."

"Good heavens, auntie! what on earth are you saying? '*My own words*,'" repeated Joan, solemnly, and unutterably aghast at the cool assertions of Mrs. Essington.

"Yes. Didn't you say once in his hearing, that

if you ever proposed to any one, and were rejected, 'you'd seize him by his coat-tails, and swing him round rapid?' or some such menace. And so, as I say, he only gave the doctor his own medicine—eh, Joan?"

"Oh dear!" said Joan, feeling rather crushed under this testimony to the rash glibness of her tongue, which she instantly remembered; "but I hadn't the smallest idea he, or any one else, was about. You *know* I hadn't, you cruel auntie! I thought I was only speaking to you. What an extraordinary life is mine! I cannot say or do the tiniest thing out of the way, but that by some protecting Providence it is shortly proclaimed on the housetops!"

"How steady that ought to make you, Joan," remarked her aunt, demurely.

"There are some people who may do and say what they like, and are rarely or never found out," she pursued, in an injured tone. "And happy are they! *My* path, however, has been peculiarly safely hedged up. As sure as ever I have done anything in the slightest degree naughty, so surely have I had cause to blush to find it fame. And I consider it very hard; for I am generally so unimpeachable in my ways, that like well-macadamized roads, they rarely require mending." And Miss Thornherst plumed herself so complacently upon her strict rectitude, that Mrs. Essington felt herself called on to put in a demurrer.

"Well, I don't know, Joan. I consider you did not behave at all well to Mr. Aynard. Indeed at one time I felt as if I should hardly be able to for-

give you. Your conduct led every one to suppose—it made me say one or two things that were highly compromising." And, in spite of the *amenae honorable* made by Joan in having resolved to accept *one* of her suitors, her aunt's brow became decidedly darkened when she spoke of her niece's past misdemeanors.

Joan hung her head down for a moment in real remorse. "I never believed he would propose—I always thought he was only amusing himself," she said, after a little pause; "and I should have led a wretched life, unless by some means I had succeeded in ejecting Mrs. Surtee. Mr. Aynard himself was very good. *He* never stamped and flew into a passion like—oh dear!—I'd better not say anything more about it, though."

"I wouldn't, if I were you," said Mrs. Essington, significantly. "He might get to hear of it, you know, and the consequences might not be pleasant. You'll have to behave yourself now."

Mrs. Essington was writing for the greater part of the evening, so Mr. Draycott and Joan had the conversation pretty much to themselves. It seemed so strange, and even a little terrible, to have the dreaded Baldwin on such familiar terms with her; and every now and then some such idea presented itself so plainly to her mind, that it was with very apprehensive eyes she looked up at him as he sat near her sofa, talking alternately to her and her aunt. And so plainly was this written on her face, that Mr. Draycott's eyes took amused notice of it, and let her see as much, to her discomfiture and inward dread lest her aunt should find it out also.

Before her illness she had fully made up her mind *not* to accept him, should he again give her the chance to reject him. She was sure she did not love him, although, of course, she had a species of interest attached to him in her own mind which was to be expected from the close companionship into which she had been thrown with him during the last few months, and a genuine pity for the misfortunes that had befallen him in such rapid succession. And now, too, when he had lost so much of what had appeared to belong to him before—if she did not marry him for love, there was very little other inducement, and not a few drawbacks.

Before that first meeting in Regent's Park she would have avoided him as much as was possible, shrinking from him with a mixture of timidity and compassion, and a nervous wish to prevent any more interviews between them, telling herself that as she did not mean to marry him, she had no right to hear *or* take part in a style of conversation of which she felt pretty certain his future wife (if he ever had one, and for *his* sake Joan hoped he would have) would feel naturally rather uncomfortable did she ever come to know of them.

But her illness had changed all that, and she returned to the life she was so nearly leaving in a very altered state of mind. She now saw no reason whatever why she should not marry him if he should still wish it: no cause why they should not make the rest of their life-journey together, if it would be any comfort to him—if it would add to his happiness. For, after all, Life *was* short—just

as clergymen tell us in their sermons—just as you see printed in serious books (a fact, by the way, which, up to this time, she had secretly disbelieved in her heart); and as "nohow you can fix it," can existence be made so very bright and pleasant, why not make the best she could of it? And if the road chanced to be rough and painful, which was more than probable, it would be something to be able to share it with one who loved her. And riches and beauty, power and fame, were not everything, Joan's awakened senses told her (the Sunday books were right again in their dismal prognostications); and after loving some one very much indeed, she thought the next best thing was to have some one to love *her* after the same fashion. And it is not every one everywhere who would be likely "to do that same," she was pretty certain of. So, after all, wouldn't it be much better for her to marry poor Baldwin, who had no one else to love, and no one else to take care of him, than to persist in dreeing her weird by herself?

Instead of answering his wife's letter, Mr. Essington came up to town the next afternoon; and it was arranged between Mr. Draycott and Joan's aunt and himself, that the marriage should take place with as little delay as possible, and that the newly-married pair should go out together to Canada, in pursuance of Baldwin's original intention of settling there as a farmer for some years to come.

Draycott Hall, in the meantime being let, and the mortgage effected on it serving as a capital to commence upon. The wedding was to take place

in London in about a month's time. Clara Thornherst was to come over from Dinan in order to be present at it, standing proxy for the rest of the family, Joan's father not being strong enough to travel in winter. For the honeymoon, however, Baldwin and she were going to Paris, and from thence would visit him and Eleanor at Dinan before returning to England to start for Canada.

The interval before the wedding was very pleasantly passed. Good Mrs. Evans had her hands full of work for Joan, and heartily content she was that her wish had been so quickly realized. Clara was expected in a few days to assist in the preparations; and Anne Armour had come one day to see her friend, having first prepared her by note for some very great surprise, and had then told her all that had occurred since she saw her last. Joan was delighted beyond measure, at the way in which things had turned out; for she had longed to ask her to be her bridesmaid, and for fear of her engagement to Mr. Alcott becoming known, had not dared to do so. There was no difficulty now, however; and Mr. Home was to be the groomsman.

It may be supposed that their past relations to each other was a frequent subject of conversation with the now engaged lovers; and especially upon the scene under Chesney Oak, Joan spoke with considerable fluency and warmth.

"It was too bad of you, Baldwin—it was indeed," she said reproachfully to him one day.

"It was rather bad, I must admit," he responded. "My only excuse is, the case was so desperate that it required desperate measures."

"Such behaviour is absolutely without precedent! You ought to beg a thousand pardons for such outrageous conduct," continued Joan, very severely.

"I am willing to ask as many pardons as you like to grant," and the sound of his voice was an amused one.

Joan darted a look at her companion which she meant to be fiery, but which ended weakly in only being reproving.

"How can you have the audacity to laugh, sir? You know very well it was no laughing matter," she said.

"You evidently thought it was not, at all events, for you began to cry like a baby."

"It was for sheer spite I cried—if I did cry; but I don't think I did."

"I don't think at all about it; I remember distinctly you wept copiously. And what did I do when I saw the tears on your cheeks, Joan?"

Miss Thornherst looked extremely foolish for a moment at this question, and would have pleaded *non mi recordo,* with defiant mendacity, only she knew she would not be believed.

"I did then what I have more than half a mind to do now, young woman!"

"My hands are free, at present!" she retorted.

"That is as much as to say you'd box my ears, eh? What a virago you are!"

"You'll be a very nice person to be in the house with," said Joan, "if you are as quick of comprehension in most things."

Baldwin laughed rather immoderately at this

remark, and in so doing gave immediate umbrage to his lady love.

"Well, what was there so odd about my speech that you forthwith go off into convulsions of laughter?" she inquired. "I'm afraid you're disposed to be hysterical, Mr. Draycott. You must lay in a good stock of smelling-salts before you start, and aromatic vinegar as well—no, that is only for fainting people."

"No, no, Joan; it is not I who am hysterical, but I remember a certain autumn day when I quite expected to see you fly off into convulsions in that way every moment; and I'm sure I shouldn't have known what to do with you if you had. I was never a ladies' man."

Joan flashed round at him indignantly, but her mouth gave way in spite of herself as the merriment in his eyes kindled a responsive light in her own. She turned away more quietly, and taking up her work again, said—

"If I *did* feel a little queer, you had been tormenting me so, I hardly knew if I were standing on my head or heels." And Joan's glance at him as she spoke partook both of reproach and defiance.

Mr. Draycott laughed again, and to her there seemed a great deal of unnecessary triumph both in voice and eyes as he responded—

"I beg your pardon, Joan; but upon my life I *can't* help laughing when I remember the look you gave me when I said old Matthew was deaf."

"There, hush! do hold your tongue, sir! I think it is quite as well as not that I am going to marry you, for it would never do to have you going about

the world with such a scandal against me; though I'd deny every word of it, if I heard it—*that* I would."

"Then you'd tell a host of lies, Joan."

"I don't care! there are some positions in which I should always find myself justified in not telling the truth."

"What shocking morality! I shall have to take you in hand I see, and try to improve you."

"Don't commence what you'll be sure to fail in," said Joan, nodding her head sagaciously.

"May I ask why you think *I* should fail?"

"Because my respected relations tried for twenty long years, and at last gave it up as a bad job," she returned, demurely, as she pursed up her lips and affected to look grave.

"Don't screw your mouth up like that, Joan: it is small enough to begin with, Heaven knows; and when you come to kiss me it will be no kiss at all, because it will be such a little one."

Joan drew herself back somewhat and opened her eyes.

"Who ever said I was going to kiss you, pray?" she asked.

"Who? Why, I myself, to be sure."

"And who told you such a thing?"

"Your own face," returned the terrible Baldwin; "I've been expecting it this last half-hour. If I'd been afraid, or thought I shouldn't like it, I'd have cut and run long ago; so I think you may venture, though it certainly is a great liberty."

Joan digested this response for a little while,

before she exactly made up her mind what to answer.

She naturally desired to half annihilate him by a look, but somehow didn't feel herself quite competent to give him such a one; and it might not succeed, perchance, and then she would have the pleasure of being laughed at for her pains—a kind of proceeding to which she objected as being extremely *infra dig.*; and not knowing how to deal with it, she was aware she generally ended in laughing herself, which of course gave *carte blanche* to the offender to pursue a similar course next time he thought fit.

"You needn't be afraid," she said at last.

"I can't help being—a little. There—see—just as I said; your head is approaching mine by degrees."

"Don't be so nonsensical, Baldwin!"

"Don't use strong and abusive language, Joan!"

"Then, be quiet, directly."

"What am I doing?"

A slight pause.

"What are you doing? Why, making a fool of yourself, and trying to make one of me, too."

"I deny the charge *in toto*."

"There go away, and leave me alone."

"That is equivalent to the celebrated 'Don't' of the Irish girls. One may easily see that you've Hibernian blood in your veins, Joan."

Miss Thornherst became rather infuriated at this, and involuntarily clenched her hands.

"Do you know, really I believe you're the only girl in the world who doubles her fist on the

slightest occasion. I should know you among a thousand by that action," went on Baldwin. "What a pugnacious child you are."

"You're a disagreeable, teasing fellow," returned Joan, stamping slightly, and looking uncertain whether to laugh or cry.

"If I were inclined to recrimination, I'd say *vous en êtes un autre*, as usual; but I wont. I'll be magnanimous and forgive you. Come! kiss and make friends; that's the part of a quarrel ladies like best, I've heard. They are such loving, gentle creatures!"

Miss Thornherst looked astonished for a moment on receiving this species of *coup de grâce;* but recovered herself with a little gasp. "As I do not consider we have quarrelled," she said "there is no necessity for forgiveness on either side."

"Well, I do; and upon the strength of it"—and Baldwin bent his head forward and looked fully and steadily into her eyes. For a minute's duration, hers indignantly bright, repelled his demanding and imperative glance, but gradually softened and turned half timidly away, when Baldwin suddenly seized on and kissed her with a vehemence that startled and even frightened her for a moment. Brow, eyes, cheeks, lips, throat, hands—Joan, bewildered and paling, stood passive for a moment under his caresses, which in their fierce, passionate strength reminded her, trembling, of that outburst beneath Chesney Oak; but then, taking one of her hands, she put it up before her as a defence, and tried gently to release herself. She forgave the embrace, for, with the curious *rapport* that had begun to

exist between her and Mr. Draycott, she had quickly entered into the feeling that was uppermost and prompted it: a feeling that she was all that remained to him in the world, and a proud, even arrogant claiming of her as entirely his own; and not only her but her will, her very senses, her very soul.

Her pity for him resisted successfully the shock she had received; and almost forgetting herself, she thought more of *him*—of what *he* was feeling, of what *he* had suffered—than her own maiden dignity, and the reserve which was natural to her even in a greater degree than to most other girls of her age and country.

He had not alluded to the circumstances that had embittered his life and turned all pleasantness into gall for him, more than once or twice: their intimacy was too new for that, even yet. A reserved and proud man such as he was, seeks for few confidants, even in those he loves dearest and best; and Joan could not refer to what had taken place unless he had spoken first. When she has been his wife some years, and he has well proved the worth and real character of the woman he has chosen, *then* perhaps he may speak freely; but, until her fate becomes so indissolubly united with his own, that his honour or dishonour must be equally shared by her, it is not likely he will allude to the heavy affliction that befel him. Still, he loves her fondly—far more than she can understand, and lets her see that she is his greatest joy and comfort.

"But, after all, Baldwin, I know I am not first

with you; and I don't expect it—hardly wish it," said Joan.

"You are quite content to play second fiddle, then?" said Mr. Draycott, half laughing, as he looked down on the fresh, fair, quaintly simple young face beside him; and truly a pleasant picture she formed, sitting there with her hands on her work—her frank, strong, dark eyes meditative and grave. "Well, I admire humility."

"Yes," said Joan, thoughtfully. "*There* is one good thing about men—I mean, one thing that would improve women very much if they cultivated it—and that is, their sublime ignoring of the fact that 'To love' 'and to be loved' is the chief end and aim of life. Now, in women—the very best of women—it is considered as essential to her amiability and femininity that she should be always ready, at a moment's notice, to give up all for love; that the fact of her being married to the person she prefers should content her for life, console her for all disappointments, and supply to her the place of everything and everybody she might have lost."

"Well, you are treating me to a pretty homily," said Baldwin, folding his arms resignedly; "go on, Joan; you know I like to hear you talk."

"That is a signal for me to stop, of course," she said, reddening slightly. "But I shall *not*, Mr. Draycott—I am going on; and if you don't like to hear, there is some cottonwool in my work-basket, and you are very welcome to some to stop your ears with. Yes; as I say, men are stronger than women in that——"

"In nothing else?" asked her companion, lazily,

blinking his eyes in the sun as he pulled carelessly at his moustache.

"Yes—and in muscular force; that's all," replied Joan, very sharply.

"Ah! Chesney Oak," provokingly, and with a quick gleam of amusement shooting athwart his face.

"Love," resumed Miss Thornherst, rather dictatorially and sublimely ignoring his rejoinder, "is all very well as an accompaniment to the song of life; but it is not the song itself, as some romancers seem to think—being an *entrée*, but *not* the grand dish at table. It is very nice, no doubt, but can be done without. So say and think the best men, and I think they are quite right, for my part. That jealous craving for undivided, absolute love is the greatest weakness that can be shown. It betokens rebellion and desertion of the garrison, or a grievous sense of their own insufficiency. Man must *die* alone; why then can he not *live* alone? And how much *enforced* loneliness is there not in the most social minds, whose craving for affectionate companionship is satisfied?

> "How rare the tenderest heart, and nearest one's own,
> Knows half the reason why we smile or sigh."

"Nonsense!" said Baldwin, putting his arm round her shoulders, and bending down towards her. "'The tenderest heart' must be a remarkably stupid one, or have a very difficult subject to deal with, if it can't make a pretty good guess, in most things, at all events. I believe I know and can follow most of your thoughts as well, perhaps better, than you can yourself."

"Don't be too sure," said Joan, blushing and laughing, as she half resisted his caress.

"I can't help being sure when I see 'confirmation strong' written in your eyes as plainly as it generally is, if I make a guess at them."

And Baldwin kissed the pretty face that was so dear to him, in whose quick, changeful expressions he at least read that so much liberty might now be permitted to him.

Joan sobered a little as the fervent tenderness of his lips transmitted to her somewhat of the earnestness and strength of the trusting love with which he regarded her; and, impelled by a thorough hearty belief in his affections, for the first time she returned his caress.

"I *do* believe you like me, Baldwin," she said, gently—"I do indeed. Teach me to love you better; teach me to love you as well as you love me."

"Will the task be a difficult one?" he questioned, fondly and proudly, as he stroked the head that was leaning confidingly against his shoulder.

"No, I don't think it will," said Joan, her voice suddenly sinking to a whisper, as, frightened by the audacity of her speech, she put up her hands to her face.

Mr. Draycott smiled, very tenderly for him (even wild animals are tamed by love, they say), and began to make her some of those sweet, foolish speeches that men forget once they are uttered, but which women never tire of, and remember long after words of a far different import have replaced them. Joan, despite her rather untamed, matter-

of-fact nature, didn't at all object to such foolishness, and lent a gravely attentive ear to all he had to say.

"But I am sure I never thought you were in love with me. Uncle used to joke and tease me, saying things of the kind, but I never believed him," she observed, after a few moments of silence on either side.

"And why not, pray? Was there anything so very outrageous or out of the way in the idea?"

"Well—no; but I always recollected you said once that you could only marry money; and then you never seemed like making up to me at all, or—now what is the good of looking so *quizzy?*" She broke off in some confusion, and feeling a strong desire to cover her face again, for she knew she had blushed a little.

"I couldn't help it, Joan; I really couldn't. You looked so exquisitely *naïve;* but finish what you were going to say."

"I was only saying you never seemed to me to be anything at all like what I thought a lover should be—that is all. I couldn't see that you talked to me more agreeably than to other people, indeed, you were generally scolding, in innuendoes, if not straight out."

"You mean to say I never 'courted' you? Well—and how the deuce was I to set about it when you were always as rough as a hedgehog's back in a passion? You'd never let me."

"I don't remember you ever having tried."

"Nonsense! I was always trying. I'm sure I quite blush for my spoonification now I look back

and recollect the half of the desperately Byronic, cut-throat kind of things I said once!"

"But Baldwin, that's not the way to ingratiate yourself into a lady's good graces by telling her you'd kill her if she married any one but you," she said, remonstratingly.

"Isn't it? Well! now I come to think of it, it seemed to make a considerable impression on *you*. However, I'm willing to learn, as you say I don't know how to set about it; only, you'll have the trouble of teaching me, that's all."

Joan's eyes opened in surprise and deprecation.

"I do like to see you look surprised," went on Mr. Draycott. "It was the expression on your face when I first saw you, and I have always remembered it. Do you know? I think your round grey eyes have kept somewhat of the same look ever since then. Let me see them." And Baldwin, standing behind the low-seated, high-backed chair, where Miss Thornherst was very comfortably placed, with her feet on an embroidered footstool, her work on her lap, and her skirts flowing out luxuriously about her, put his hands round her neck, and suddenly turned up the lovely flower-like face, to gratify himself with the repetition of the expression he so much admired.

"Be quiet, Baldwin! Let go my face! If you want to look at me, you can come round and do so without touching me; I'm astonished at you!"

"That's just what I say, Joan," tranquilly; "you're always in a state of astonishment about something or other—or look as if you were. Come, don't be absurd; you don't suppose I'm going to

let you off without a kiss, do you?" And suiting the action to the word, too quick to be prevented, he bent his head and pressed a kiss long and tender on each of those pretty eyes, which were widened by his audacity to their utmost extent.

"How *can* you, Baldwin? I hate you! Go away!"

And Mistress Joan, after having perforce submitted to the operation, released herself and struggled into a fiercely upright posture on the seat; whence she darted indignant glances at, and opposed rebellious rose-coloured cheeks to the enemy, who had quietly walked round her chair in the meanwhile.

"You look like a fowl, with all its feathers on end," he remarked, complimentarily, and with a certain amount of accuracy in his observation.

"I believe that is the fourth time you have tried to kiss me to-day," began Joan, hotly.

"Tried! By Jove, I did it without trying at all! 'Tried,' indeed! One uses that word only when success is not attained. Now, you can't deny that if anybody was ever kiss——"

"I *wont* listen!" And her hands went up to her ears. "You are really the most disagreeable tease I know!"

"Clara will be at Charing-cross to-morrow at six o'clock," said Mrs. Essington, entering with an open letter in her hand. "Baldwin, will you go with us to meet her, or would you rather not?"

"Just as Joan likes," responded Mr. Draycott. "I'm sure I'm always ready to do anything she

wishes, though she abuses me like a pickpocket when we are alone."

"You'll be useful about the luggage and cabs," said Joan, snappishly, "so you may come. As for abusing you, sir, how *can* you talk so? But auntie knows very well what you are."

"I know this—that you are a queer pair of people, but I suppose you understand each other. And I know this, also, Joan, that unless you can manage to come out with me this afternoon to go to the dressmaker's, she will never have done by Wednesday next. Think, you know the time is running on."

"I can go very well, auntie," said her niece, in a more subdued tone. "It is not cold, and I will wrap up warmly."

A week has gone by. Clara has arrived, and makes herself very agreeable to her future brother-in-law and the Essingtons—her conduct to her sister hovering between the patronizing and exultant. She and Anne were to be the two bridesmaids; and very pretty the wedding bid fair to be, with so much good looks in the principal actors therein. A quality, hitherto unsuspected, came to light about this time, in Joan's character. She showed herself to be violently jealous.

"I don't care for your sister Clara's manners," Baldwin observed privately to her one day, soon after he had been made known to his future sister-in-law.

"If you did," Joan responded, turning suddenly *very* red in the face, and from some cause or other

appearing decidedly ruffled, "I shouldn't care for *you* much longer. I wont have you like my sisters —either of them; do you hear? I'm not at all fond of them myself—rather the other way indeed; and I wont have *you* get fond of them."

Mr. Draycott looked surprised for a minute; and then his expression changing into an amused one, fairly laughed in her face, which was an imperative and rather an angry one.

"What! mustn't I smile even, Joan? Did it ever occur to you that you are very jealous? What a rod to hold over you!"

"I don't mind being laughed at," she said, superbly; "but with those I care for, I *must* be all or nothing. Simply that I never yet liked any one over whom I had not supreme power. If they rebel, 'they are not worth the keeping—let them go;' for, after all, I can manage very well without them; but if they remain, they must obey me!"

"Obey!" said Mr. Draycott.

"Yes. Don't you know what the word means? The meaning is, 'being in subjection,'" explained Joan, kindly enlightening him.

He certainly did not look as though he needed much enlightenment, as he rose from his seat and walking over to where she was—working by one of the drawing-room windows—stood there, looking down on her.

"And when you are tired of exercising your sovereignty, or find it too heavy for you, what should you do with it, may I ask?" he said.

"What could I do better than resign it into the hands of my most devoted servant?" she answered,

bowing low before him with a mocking inclination; and glancing up, her demure eyes chequered by a dancing light of fun.

Mr. Draycott smiled as his graver glance met hers; but instead of making any reply, he turned away his head from her and looked thoughtfully out of window; Joan, fancying she had displeased him, twisted herself round in her chair so that she could see him better, and looked up with half-puzzled, half-grieved eyes into his face.

"What are you thinking of?" she asked, impatiently, after waiting a few troubled moments for him to speak to or take notice of her in some way; and, as she thus questioned him, she impulsively laid a caressing hand on his arm, to draw his attention to her. His head came round musingly, and he contemplated her for a second or so before he answered, with the half smile that the sight of her honest, wide-awake, and rather inquiring face always called up. (Why do people of complicated minds generally have a certain sense of superiority over those who are more straightforward and simple?)

"I am thinking, Joan, how very little, after all, I really know of the woman who is to be my wife," he said; and his eyes, keen and searching at all times, looked doubly penetrating to her at the moment he spoke.

A little astonished, and then perplexed, at the reply she had received, her hand dropped quietly from his arm; and a quick, sensitive flush rushed into her face and throat, tinging even her eyelids, as the very unaccustomed tears started burningly

beneath them. Involuntarily—for, like most really sensitive people, Joan was very shy of showing emotion—she drooped her eyes and was averting her face, where, eloquently clear, the struggle to command her sudden rising of feeling could be seen, when she changed her mind, and by a quick movement of her head, faced round upon him resolutely.

"And I, too, may say as well as you, how very little I know of the man who is to be my husband," she said. "How women can be such *fools* as to marry, and men, too, for their part, I can't imagine!"

"Men want wives," said Mr. Draycott, philosophically.

"It doesn't at all follow they should have them, though," snapped his lady-love.

"Joan, don't excite yourself; you are getting hot. A wise young woman like you is doubtlessly aware that a demand naturally creates a supply."

Mr. Alcott had made no sign by way of answer to Anne's letter; nor had she again seen his mother. She quitted the neighbourhood almost immediately after the rupture of her son's engagement, and went with him to Brighton. In her heart, the little widow rejoiced that Anne was not to be her daughter-in-law. She had never really "taken to" her, although she had tried to like her because George had wished her to do so; and her whole mother's nature was up in arms with indignation at the unprincipled manner in which his affections had been trifled with by her. She said something

of this once to him, soon after it had occurred; but he stopped her at once. "Mother, don't," he said, sternly. "I will not hear her spoken of like that. Whatever she has done—however she has acted, she will always be the woman I like best in all the world. You will much oblige me by never speaking of her or her family again. Let us forget them."

He had everything to console him though, and through Mr. Legh, his uncle, soon procured various introductions to people who set him on his legs in society, being delighted to have such a part to act towards a young man who had such a romantic history attached to the name he bore, and was so rich, and not at all unpresentable. Within six months he married a pretty schoolgirl just introduced, and Anne was forgotten, or seemed to be so.

Mr. Home offered Mr. Armour an allowance as long as he should live; and after paying the greater part of the family's debts, he helped them to move to Cheltenham, where an aunt of Mrs. Armour's, of whom mention has been made, resided.

Julia got over her disappointment as regarded her hopes of perhaps winning the affections of George Alcott at their rebound, and made herself very pleasant to her sister for the rest of the time she remained in the house; having a prudent eye to future invitations, and not at all believing that when once married, Anne would be as virtually dead to all her family, excepting her father, as Ida really was. Mrs. Armour was swelling with importance at the favourable turn circumstances had taken,

and utterly refused to see that Anne had had any part in bringing it about.

"Mr. Home could not have done less," she averred, "and might easily have done more. He could hardly expect to marry the daughter, and let her parents live in embarrassment of the most painful description. Mr. Alcott, she was sure, would have been more generous; and as far as she had seen of him, was a young man of much better principles than Julian Home."

Before Anne went away, though, her stepmother had come round to a far milder and more favourable state of mind concerning the marriage. What with his pleasant manners and presents, and the receiving, too, of the allowance that effectually did away with all fear of future privations, Julian was placed on a far higher pedestal in her esteem than at one time it had seemed possible he should ever occupy.

"I really think you will marry a kind-hearted man," she condescended once to say to Anne—"if he is not all that your best friends would have desired for you; and, starting anew in life, with every reasonable hopes of happiness, it will be your own fault if you are not contented."

With difficulty her stepdaughter was able to repress the prompt rejoinder that rose to her lips—"that even if she were not happy, it would never come into her head to ask help from *her* to make her so." But her pacific resolutions did not fail her; and though her lips had parted to speak, she closed them again.

"Of *earthly* happiness I meant, of course, *only*,"

continued Mrs. Armour, with some tartness, having seen by Anne's face that she had been about to speak, but had checked herself in time; and, we must suppose, guessing pretty well what kind of a remark had been thus smothered in its birth.

"With your prospects as to future bliss, I shall have nothing more to do, excepting to remember you in the petitions I habitually offer up, even for the most abandoned of mankind. ('Jews, Turks, Heretics, and Infidels—I'm in the last category, I suppose,' commented Anne, inwardly and rapidly.) No! nothing more to do, once you have quitted this house." (Mrs. Armour ever spoke of No. 70, Grapnel-road, as if it were rather a 'state of being' than an ordinary cheap suburban house; or, at least, as if they were precincts sanctified by *her* presence.) "They will be in your own hands then; and *it remains to be seen,*" emphatically, "if you will be enabled to conduct yourself in a more befitting manner in your married life than (in spite both of the most affectionate warnings and reproofs) you have ever done during your most reprehensible single one: doing all you could to render every one around you as unhappy and uncomfortable as possible."

"Let us hope a decided change for the better will take place, once the marriage ceremony is over—for Mr. Home's sake, if not for mine," said Anne, sententiously, and with suspicious correctness of demeanour; for the last speech had very nearly proved too much for her gravity.

"Certainly I will *hope* so, though I must confess, to speak plainly, I see very little grounds for such

a hope," retorts Mrs. Armour, with that engaging candour for which she is distinguished. "In looking back over the years in which we have been together, I can faithfully say, on my part, there has been *nothing whatever* to reproach myself with! I leave it to your conscience whether *you* can say as much for yourself."

"Certainly, mamma, you have nothing to reproach yourself with on the ground of not speaking plainly. If your duty consisted solely in that, I willingly give my testimony concerning your scrupulous performance of it," said Anne, mildly and evasively, avoiding a response as to her opinion of her own conduct; being for the moment somewhat stunned at the verbal expression of Mrs. Armour's conviction as to her own irreproachableness. "I really do not think there is any one in the world who is less addicted to the agreeable but pernicious art of flattery than you are," she added softly, and lifting her eyes, with as dove-like a look in them as she could assume, to the perplexed countenance of her stepmother, whose dominant expression at that instant appeared to be indecision.

An inward debate as to whether she should burst into tears, try to box Anne's ears, or make believe not to see the maliciousness of her observations, ended in her adopting the last suggestion; although there was a look of "I bide my time" in her eyes, as they met the half-veiled demureness of the soft brown orbs that sought hers with such insinuating pertinacity, which, had Anne been going to remain longer in "that house," boded ill for her comfort.

Joan's marriage was to precede hers by a month

only, and so Anne could afford to be patient and unretorting. In consideration of the state of Mr. Home's uncle's health, and the recent deaths in both families, it was to be of the very quietest description.

"Well, upon my word, I declare it is almost provoking," said Mrs. Essington, contemplating some of Joan's dresses, which had just been sent home from the dressmaker's, lying spread out in her niece's bedroom in all their pristine freshness. "Here you are equipped for a cold climate, and you are off now to a warm one! Madras is one of the very hottest parts of India——"

"And I shall see Nanny!" cried Joan, rapturously, with her face all in a glow as she clasped her hands, never heeding her aunt's lamentations over her dresses.

"Yes—it is very nice for you, certainly; but I must say I wish Mr. Henry Draycott had come over a few weeks sooner—or if he had only telegraphed. Look at all the trouble that might have been spared," went on Mrs. Essington, rather aggrieved.

For Mr. Henry Draycott (the brother of Baldwin's and poor Stephen's mother) had returned very suddenly to England, seriously ill with the liver complaint. He had been obliged to leave India and all his affairs at a few days' notice; and was put on board the steamer in an almost dying state. He revived considerably though on his voyage home; but would never be able to return to Madras. He looked to Baldwin, then, to go out and wind up his affairs for him. For he had heard nothing of the events of the past two months, and expected to

see his brother-in-law still living, and only able to spare his remaining son from his side for a short time. But finding affairs in the state they were, after he had surmounted his first state of astounded indignation, he at once proposed that in place of going to Canada, his nephew and his wife should proceed immediately to Madras; and Baldwin could act as his manager and overseer, being given a share in the business, and the prospect of eventually inheriting the whole of his fortune.

Here was good news for Joan; and she rejoiced over it and her aunt with her, in spite of those useless new dresses. But she would want them on the voyage, no doubt, and in the cold season, when they went to the high districts in Ceylon to recruit, so they would not be wasted.

She had been introduced to her future uncle at his hotel (for he was too ill to pay visits, although very much better than he once ever thought to be), and he was much pleased with her; presenting her with a splendid set of pearl ornaments for her marriage, besides several minor presents. Mr. Aynard, hearing of the coming event, had sent her a very beautiful bracelet, and to Joan's utter amazement, Mrs. Surtee also reminded her of her existence by a valuable ring.

"For better or worse—for richer or poorer——"

It is a clergyman's grave voice that is saying these words; and Joan's, very low but clear, repeats them after him, as she stands, all in her bridal white, with Baldwin Draycott's hand clasped in hers, before the communion-rails of one of the

West-end London churches, one day early in December. The building was very large and gloomy-looking; the pews almost empty, for very few persons besides the wedding-party were present. The day was a soft "muggy" one, with light grey clouds all over the sky, and only the faintest hints of the sun's presence behind them. The weather, however, was not at all cold, for there had been a fall of rain that morning, and more might be expected before the day was ended; but, in fact, there was nothing pretty, or bright, or fresh-looking about except the bride and her maids, and Mrs. Essington's ruby-coloured silk dress.

All in white, with orange-blossoms in her hair, Joan's face was as white as her veil, but otherwise she was both calm and self-composed. She had been very nervous at the beginning of the service, and her heart beat so loudly, that involuntarily and secretly she pressed one hand tightly on it to try to quiet it; but, as the minutes went on, she lost all sense of self-consciousness, and stood beside her tall bridegroom, forgetting everything and everybody else in the world, and absorbed entirely in her part of the ceremony. It was less a joyous than a solemn occasion to her; and when Baldwin Draycott had repeated the usual formula, and she was required to do the same, she said the words as if indeed she felt their full importance, and that with her whole heart and mind and strength she would endeavour to keep the oath she took. As she repeated them, a dim realization came to her that the wife's life in some cases needs every *strength* that can be given her; that as she was

one of those women who are always leant on rather than one who leans, so she must want a double portion of love and trust and steadfastness to bear her part well in the future that was before her; and her heart went up in prayer to God as it had not before done but on two occasions in her life, to implore his help to make her indeed "faithful unto death."

The ring was on her finger, the blessing pronounced, the exhortation finished, and they turned to leave the altar; when, very suddenly the joy-bells clashed out, loudly and brightly, and with their merry music made the great empty church re-echo. Joan had started, and involuntarily looked up towards the roof when she heard them ring out so abruptly; and the sudden emotion sent the blood flushing into her cheeks and lips as she looked downward again, and met Baldwin's eyes fixed laughingly on her, amused at her momentary movement of alarm. But she smiled back at him in answer, as she walked down the aisle, with her arm through his; and from that minute her great gravity was merged in blushing shyness and a sort of subdued happiness that was very pretty to see.

Beautiful Anne looked regal in her simple white dress, and Clara Thornherst so extremely pretty, that if Joan had not been one of the most charming little brides that is often seen, she would have been quite lost in comparison with her maids.

The signing in the vestry, and the kisses and congratulations were over—they did not take very long either, for there were but few people present—only the immediate relatives on either side; and